

Five executions in five weeks. As a journalist for America's most nihilistic publication, *Filth*, Harry Cain should find this a snap. But there is the added burden of burgeoning insanity. Hard to say if he will make it home alive. Or if the universe itself will allow it.

This is David Miller's sixth novel. All titles published by Sodomite Media. Available at your local bookseller.



DEATH TRIP

D. MILLER

DEATH TRIP

DAVID MILLER

Death Trip

David Miller

All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-1729676592

ISBN-10: 1729676596

Copyright © 2019 by David Miller

Sodomite Media Corporation, New York, NY

Save Me
Save Me, Save Me
Save Me, Save Me, Save Me
Save Me, Save Me, Save Me, Save Me
Save Me, Save Me, Save Me, Save Me, Save
Me Save Me Save Me Save Me Save Me Save Me
Save Me Save ME Save Me Save Me Save Me save Me Save

--Anon.

Chapter One: June 3, 2003

(Starke, Florida)

Here's the Happiest Man on Death Row, Mr. Joe Arridy! He's in fashionable leg irons, shuffling into the Andrew Jackson Maximum Security Prison's visitors men's room, to speak the Good News unto Harry Cain.

"Stars go nowhere, up and down only, like merry-go-round horses," Joe told Harry who, truth be told, had stopped listening before the first syllable was uttered. Somehow, he knew instinctively what this visitation foretold. He was content to simply let it happen rather than interact with the vision in front of him.

A once and future dope fiend, Harry Cain had already internalized the notion of Apocalypse completely. He had already settled his spiritual debts.

He suspected that he was dead already. He could feel himself moving within hell's first circle where it was rumored unbelieving poets like him would dwell for eternity, obsessed with the versifier's art. He thought of himself as a victim of a celestial conspiracy in this regard. He didn't think he deserved to be punished in such a way. He thought of himself for the most part as a benign presence in an increasingly hostile world:

*Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
perché non sali il diletto monte
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?*

Death Trip 3

When Joe's Death Row overseer, a Baptist by the name of Johnson, had come for Joe at midnight on January 6 of 1939, he asked him what he thought the immediate future might hold for him.

"We're going for ice cream," Joe, who, at least in those days, had an IQ consistently tested at 58 told Warden Johnson. He looked crestfallen when apprised that this wasn't so.

His hands were cuffed behind his back and a red blindfold was secured across the bridge of his nose with a double knot. As this death sentence was to be carried out via cyanide gas release, there was no mandated reason for the blindfold. Merely, a WWI surplus canister would be rolled into the airtight chamber and the door quickly slammed shut.

But Warden Johnson was wary of making eye contact with Joe at the moment the white cloud bloomed around him. He hadn't fully rationalized what was about to happen to poor Joe Arridy (who, it should be mentioned, was a wholly innocent man). The warden was a Christian and possessed of specific beliefs concerning the afterlife including banishment of the wicked into a realm of perpetual fire. He didn't want to look through the gas chamber's glass and detect a simple soul's murder. He didn't want to encounter his reflection therein and realize it was him that did the deed.

The purpose of the blindfold was to blind the warden, in other words, not Joe. Johnson had lacked the requisite self-knowledge simply to turn away. Or refuse on moral grounds to go forward with the execution.

He was a dutiful man intent on maintaining a dutiful bearing. He couldn't find the source of his squeamishness in this instance. He couldn't interpret his personal discomfort regarding Joe Arridy's execution as resulting from a pang of conscience. Ignorant of his own motives, merely he felt the powerful need to look away. He was doing Joe a favor, he thought, by hiding the horror of his circumstances from him. He thought of himself as a good man despite the guilt

Death Trip 4

gnawing away at him like one of the Colorado prison rats gnawing at a concrete wall for months on end.

"When I open my eyes now I see polka dots only!" Joe Arridy said to Harry Cain some sixty years after his state execution and began to blink. Then as now the blindfold was still very much on him. It was bound in place so securely there was an abrasion that had formed above his right cheek from where the cloth cut. Then as now he seemed unbothered by the cloth. He could seemingly navigate without eyes ably. It was an effect of his severe retardation perhaps. Perhaps it was because he was not really there and therefore ignorant of his physical limitations.

He was here to issue a warning unto Harry Cain and then disappear. His Creator had no need to articulate what he could and couldn't do physically, you see. It was immaterial to his being.

There in one of the bathroom's angular shadows stood a naked heaving man that Cain assumed to be Warden Johnson. His eyes had been plucked from him so that shadows sprung from their sockets like a weepy drag queen's mascara. The misplaced yellow orbs doubled as ornaments stapled to the warden's nipples.

These were always vigilant, watching. Whereas Joe's were always blinded.

"Looks painful," Harry said to himself and wondered after their symbolism. He couldn't say what circle of hell he had been consigned to just then. Unlettered like so many others of his bohemian ilk, he was not an aficionado of Dante Alighieri's great epic. He understood the warden's presence here merely as a penitential act.

Likely they were both here to prophesize about some on-rushing disaster for humanity. God, or Harry's treasonous unconscious, was not sufficiently caring about him to merely advocate for his safety. There was something bigger at play here apart from a decadent's imminent doom. But Joe, being a moron, seemed as tongue-tied as Harry himself.

Death Trip 5

Cain was in the midst of taking a shit when the blindfolded vision appeared before him. He assumed an endpoint of his sanity had been encountered. Presently he was awed and humbled by it.

He always thought madness was a gift. Or maybe God was real and was attempting to make his plans known via a manic vision. But to a lunatic vision and hallucination were indistinguishable states. Harry Cain knew this only instinctively. Thus, he was content to simply squat on the stall-less toilet and wait for the Comedy to end.

One of Warden Johnson's thread-dangling lidless eyes had of late rotated in his direction as if an emphatic point was about to be made by him.

"You're all in big trouble," Joe Arridy told Harry and smiled. He didn't elaborate afterwards as he assumed perhaps this one statement was ample warning. He knew Harry somehow. He especially knew his many talents and obsessions.

He knew him as a genius of eschatological deduction, as a Sherlock Holmes of the Apocalypse. For Harry, there was no herald needed regarding The Second Coming of Christ Jesus. He could already feel the ashes of the fallen world in the spaces between his teeth. He could already feel that the hour of judgment was upon them all.

*Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.*

According to an admittedly sparse public record concerning this infamous case, neither Joe's stricken mother nor the Denver cop who had wrenched the confession out of Joe by repeatedly extinguishing a Chesterfield Extra-long into his left palm had shown up to pay their last respects.

"For the longest time," Joe said. "It was dark and cold. And now it is bright and warm."

Death Trip 6

Joe Arridy told Harry Cain this. He was talking about his journey from mostly forgotten historical note to somebody's hallucination.

"I will be here as long as you need me to be here," Joe said to Harry Cain and smiled. Out of a fear of smuggled contraband, all the toilets here were devoid of stalls. There was no physical barrier between them.

Joe seemed waiting for a comforting gesture from Harry. He was waiting for him to rise and button up and issue a hug.

At the moment nothing could be less likely than that, however.

"I know what you're here for," Harry said to Joe and dug in his pocket for a Chesterfield of his own (though nowadays they only came in one size). He was not in any hurry to affirm his suspicion. For now, he was content to sit and wait.

He wanted to hear it from Joe. He thought he had gone crazy, but he had wanted to hear it, so to speak, from the horse's mouth. A hallucination that is perceived as a holy vision is the one true herald of madness. He wanted to hear Joe Arridy say it regardless, that he was unreal as a dream figment. Too much booze and too many drugs had been imbibed over the years by Harry to gainsay this conclusion. Nevertheless, Harry wasn't in any hurry to secure his own straitjacket. He assumed he would be just as crazy ten minutes from now if he simply sat back on the crapper and smoked passively.

You write the truth about this country unadorned with excuses, Joe told him, and there will be a slightly cooler spot of hell reserved for you upon the moment of your death.

"You control what you control independent of the needs of others," Joe said, suddenly seeming to have taken on a new voice. His formerly stooped shoulders had grown straight as if having been infused with an alien spirit. Impossible to say in this situation which persona was native to his being. He was a purely fictional creation and responded to outside stimuli provisionally. He spoke in a way likely Harry's

Death Trip 7

unconscious needed him to speak in. He didn't let on that there was a kernel soul anywhere that was subject to betraying via a false persona.

He said it wasn't the Lord that had sent him here, so much as the sense that the nefarious deeds of a legion of lower demons were passing unobserved, owing to so much media-government collusion.

"They don't know how it really is as they don't look," Joe said to Harry and for the first time began to tug at his blindfold lightly as if he had just discovered that it was on. He was speaking not so much about Harry or his decadent cohorts as about what amounted to the official media outlets and their political overseers. They were conspicuously absent from this maximum-security penitentiary in rural Florida. The stories to be told here did not interest them and likely were anathema to their political masters. Neither group saw any upside in their relating. Their relating could only foment bad feelings, a general distrust for authority and slack sales for their advertising communities. It would engender a pervasive feeling of unease, moreover. That the State was a giant, violent contraption whose controls had been commandeered by troops of killer apes was discomfiting in the extreme. In stir, there was cruelty and authoritarianism that belied the notion of America as an enlightened country. From your average killer ape's perspective, there was nothing in here to see. For the media whore, every path for every story led to a sterile ocean of totalitarianism. Death penalty promulgation was old news to them but at the same time forbidden information. There were scenes within these walls that if they were faithfully reproduced for the benefit of the public, would cause society to convulse. A medusa would be handed a mirror. And likely everything would change from that point on.

According to Joe Arridy, there was a deep need to tell his story because the universe abhorred the loss of information from its precincts.

Death Trip 8

"God made human beings one way for a purpose," Joe told Harry, trying to be succinct. Invariably there would be interesting stories to tell about certain people when they were gone. And probably that was all. This self-censorship that they were engaged in now worked against men's relative value. To God Almighty, humans were mere conversation pieces and their true ugliness needed to be on full display. They were killer apes believing themselves angelic. It was pathetic and hilarious at once. It would make for great reading if their exploits were ever recorded faithfully. In this endeavor, somebody like Harry Cain could be of great value. Cain surmised human beings just as he surmised ant colonies. He saw them as wretched but biologically necessary. He saw them as domineering creatures compelled by basic nature to destroy.

Sympatico as he was with Arridy's basic demands, Harry didn't understand why he should, if only as a matter of preserving self-esteem, knuckle under to the compulsions of his own ravaged soul.

"Your one redeeming characteristic," Joe told him, "is your incorruptibility."

Well, this was true in a sense. Because in all his years striving to get ahead, Harry never once took it up the ass merely out of a desire to succeed.

"I'm a slave to my own manias," Harry told Joe. And as proof pointed to one of Warden Johnson's rotating eyes. This was a dream-vision he was experiencing while awake based on another dream vision experienced while asleep. Visions based on visions apparently were notoriously untrustworthy. The outside world, if there was such a thing, didn't matter much anymore. There was a perverseness to this self-referential nature. Harry was unaware of so much of life. This gave him the ability to resist its manifold temptations. His moral sternness was based on his own obliviousness. In other words, he wasn't particularly moral at all.

Death Trip 9

Joe Arridy knew this about Harry. But here he was a minute after Cain's cig had been smoked, persisting in the universe.

"As we see it, you're the only one who can do this hellish scene justice, the only one who could capture what we need you to capture unsentimentally," Joe said and reached over to Warden Johnson with felicitous ease, considering that he was functionally blind. Johnson's dangling eyeballs were fruit to be plucked. Joe did this ably to one of the dangling eyes. He held the viscous orb between thumb and forefinger and rolled it around delicately, as if there was some knowledge to be gained from its texture.

Soon he tossed the eye over to Harry. He told him to swallow it if he wanted to gain true knowledge into the way the world worked.

"Don't bite it," he told Harry. He thought the cornea by this point had hardened to the consistency of glass. This eye was a type of spiritual medication that would take great effort to keep down before it could begin to heal. Cain knew this and pressed hard against the waves of nausea that affected him after he swallowed it. He knew without being told that it would be awhile before its effects could be felt fully. He knew it was best not to focus on the transformation. What would come of it would come in gradual stages, independent of conscious will. So, he might not be prepared for it.

We are all empty vessels. So much so. We are all conglomerations of vain misunderstanding formed around a kernel hardness. This core forms when an irritant enters into the soul and a mucoidal pearl gathers around it.

Harry thought that to preserve his sanity he should not talk about his vision of Joe Arridy to other (putatively real) human beings. He suspected he had gone crazy but wasn't completely convinced that this was so. He didn't want to seed the idea that this was the case with his colleagues. They could decide if he was worthy of a straitjacket on their own. They were likely prejudicial in their judgments of him by now

Death Trip 10

regardless. He wasn't the most pleasant person to be around. Ordinary folk saw his perpetual frown and assumed it a sign of inward turmoil. They didn't know so much about him but assumed so much. If he told them he was crazy, that was likely all the information they would ever require to confirm their prejudices of him.

Before leaving Joe's presence, Harry had asked him when he would know his mission had been completed successfully.

"You come to a place and you'll know it as the end of life," Joe Arridy told Harry Cain and turned toward him. In doing so, he revealed to him the damage the cyanide gas had rendered along the ridge of his once beautiful jaw line. The skin had been pulled back to the point that a hollow had been created four inches below, hugging the carotid artery. This made him seem more like a nightmare vision than a flesh and blood man. They hadn't secured his head before Zero Hour. There had been cervical damage rendered when the thrashing started. His lungs had been burnt through and he talked through the auspices of super-nature. The muscles in his jaw had been damaged when, ten seconds into his ordeal, he began to scream out of fear for what was happening to him.

Poor Joe Arridy who had died alone in a sealed chamber unobserved by sympathetic eyes was at this moment reborn into some sort of otherworldly prophet.

"Tread lightly now," Harry Cain had said to both visions before him when exiting the prison bathroom and turned around to see if they were still there. The Warden had gone to one knee, his mascara shadows suggesting unseen tears. Impossible for Harry to say why or what position he assumed once the door swung shut. Crying for a lost America perhaps. Or a paradise that never was. He kept his own counsel. He never bothered mouthing a word.

It was Joe Arridy, perhaps rightly, who was allowed to speak. The feelings of his executioner would be lost to all history. In death, a type of dignity for the falsely accused would be reclaimed. Such was the fantasy in front of Harry

Death Trip 11

Cain. Who knew if it corresponded to objective reality's narrative. Who knew if any of us did.

Presently Cain wasn't focusing on the symbolic profundity of the vision, however. Instead, he was reviewing his own recent memory for signs of the schizophrenia that had obviously presented its symptoms to him in the past ten minutes.

"Are you myself," he asked his reflection in that thick Michigan accent of his, staring at his reflection in the visitor lobby's Plexiglas. No answer was expected back, but he couldn't avoid lingering over the image he saw there to check for signs of a loss of motor control. A bit of involuntary twitching might suggest a deeper loss of control to come. Or maybe one eye would prove to be dilated far more than the other. He was looking for signs that added up to a symptomology. But he was no psychiatrist.

If he was sick, he wanted to know how far gone he might be and whether medical attention should be sought. He wasn't sure about the illness' progress. He didn't know if schizophrenia had a mild variant. Maybe he could act normally all throughout the hallucinations that would follow, and the disease would abate on its own. Or maybe eventually he could simply manage it with booze or some sort of amphetamine/narcotic combo.

A long-term drug abuser, Cain thought he had the requisite knowledge to put parts of his brain to sleep at will. He was accustomed to existing in an altered state of awareness and he thought this would be an advantage for him in managing the dark visions that would soon pour down on him like so much toxic rain once the madness descended in earnest. He could take it all in stride, the visions and compulsions. So much so that he believed he could avoid being diagnosed completely by a state-appointed mental health professional. It would be his secret utterly. And he would take it with him to the grave. The exterior strangeness he evinced he could advertise as belonging to an eccentric's

Death Trip 12

tendency towards non-conformist behavior. Nobody would be able to peer inside him and see that his soul was broken. He could manage the illness, rage against it until a type of equilibrium was gained. He assumed he would never be free of the terror it brought. But this was not so intolerable. Sanity frequently brought more terror than madness brought anyway. He wouldn't believe himself necessarily cursed to live on, divorced from reality for years at a time.

The Great Change had already started within Harry Cain. He assumed it was irrevocable.

"I can already feel the motherfucking thing sprouting roots deep inside me," Cain said to *Filth* magazine's laconic house photographer, Bones, of the swallowed rotten eye. He could feel the nodules of the wretched thing on the tip of his tongue. And once he swallowed it, roots began to sprout from the nodules and anchor themselves somewhere deep within. Never mind the health concerns regarding this growth, the discomfort alone he felt would be enough to lay him low. Bones eventually would be called on to manipulate an improvised endoscope. He was the only other human being Harry could confide in about this matter. Like Harry, Bones was indifferent to human suffering and slightly amused about its extreme forms. Like Harry, he was an alien at heart who wouldn't betray a trust merely to curry favor with society.

The eyeball's sprouting and eventually flowering would either be halted by his own internal defenses or it wouldn't. And if it wouldn't, Cain suspected there was no sense dwelling on the changes it enforced on its host body. He was informing Bones merely as a professional courtesy in case his behavior became even more withdrawn than usual. He was trying not to punt on his professional obligations just yet (as limited as they might be). Home presently for Harry was a double-wide on the outskirts of America's pomegranate capital, Panama City, Florida. All the good times were gone for him. He was truly grateful for this assignment.

Death Trip 13

The series of articles Harry was writing for the Brooklyn-based *Filth* was entitled, "Death Trip: Five Executions in Five Weeks across the Deep South." Starting in northern Florida, he and Bones would execute an arc that paralleled the Gulf Coast. Last stop was a prison just outside Brownsville, Texas where the famed child murderer/bête noire of a thousand diatribes, Rance Muto, would finally get his. Over a month away, the execution had already spurred tailgating in the prison's weedy parking lot. Advocates of every stripe were holding out hope for a public execution. They all wanted to bring exposure to the act but for entirely different reasons.

If this kept up, Harry assumed he was bound for a stay in the Florida prison's infirmary. They were supposed to be here bearing witness to premeditated state-sponsored murder, but he wasn't feeling up to it just then. He sensed somehow that the eyeball roots were bound for his brain. Once they had infiltrated the gray matter, he assumed he would be irrevocably insane. This by itself did not constitute tragedy. But he felt that Bones, who he considered his friend, had the right to know. Harry had a child somewhere in Oregon who would need to be apprised when he was officially *non compos mentis*. He had various business affairs that Bones would be required to tidy up after he was given power-of-attorney. He felt it would be unbearable going crazy in private. He felt he owed other people some sort of cursory explanation for what had gone wrong with him.

All the rivulets of drool and the unfocused gaze associated within the malady would require some sort of contextualizing, if only for Harry to not be accused of faking it.

"It would be too much to bear up to, to have your honesty questioned when you were at the same time going nuts," Harry told Bones and went spread-eagle as a hand-held metal detector was passed over the framework of his body. To him it would be a double penalty to be crazy and defamed at once. He thought of himself as at-root incorruptible despite his

Death Trip 14

many dalliances with life's dark side. And by the time the charge was made, he would have no ability to defend himself against it ably.

Schizophrenia being a shattering of the mirror of the soul, you could only go crazy once. After having spied the dark visions that existed on the other side of the mirror, the memory would remain with a man unto the grave. It would distort his perceptions irrevocably.

"I'm fucked already even if it stops right now," Harry told Bones as they collected their equipment from the plastic bins that it had been tossed into just like while walking through airport security. Lord knew exactly what sort of contraband prevailing authority was looking for at this checkpoint. The screws here didn't believe in taking chances. Or maybe they were aware of the anti-death penalty slant that Harry's article would take and were merely trying to bust balls. Very few people who thought the death penalty was a clever idea would take the trouble to venture out for a close-up gander at its mechanics. They would rather support it abstractly like justice itself. They didn't believe the human drama involved in the process should hold any weight at all.

Hipsters like Harry and Bones, with their pale skin, black suits and perpetually downcast expressions seemed especially suspicious to the prison officials around here who above all were desirous of maintaining order.

"They're talking about a full cavity search on the way out," Bones mumbled to Harry while reclaiming his smokes from the bin. The cigs had come under scrutiny from the gendarmes standing in front of the thousand-pound gate at Death Row's mouth. Might have thought Bones had substituted the tobacco in the smokes for weed. And that he was intent on passing it out to the prisoners. To them, he had the look of somebody who would do the same or worse. Bones had an expressionless face that was routinely assumed to conceal anti-social intentions. He seemed the sort of person beyond ordinary political concern. A hipster manqué. He

embraced anarchy merely out of appreciation for anarchy's aesthetic qualities. He would smuggle in drugs to felons expressly because it was forbidden to do so.

He wanted to test his limits merely to see how clever he was. On this occasion, he was getting off scot-free. The weed was on his person in a Glad bag taped to the interior of his right thigh. At some point he would reach through the hole in his trouser pocket and begin to drop off Christmas presents to the inmates. Whether they wanted to pick them up or not, Bones would leave these little weed dollops in his wake. He figured he wouldn't be back here more than one more time, so it didn't matter if he was suspected of chicanery. He would attend the executions and snap his pictures on the sly. And then they could do with him what they wanted.

If they wanted to do a full cavity search on either of them, that was alright with Bones. But for the life of him, he couldn't detect the motivation about how come.

"What do they think we'd be smuggling out of there," he asked Cain just as they started the familiar fifty-foot walk past the vacant cells to the execution chamber. Cain had only been here one time before. But already it was familiar to him. Each of these empty cells once housed men who had been executed. Cleaned out as they were otherwise, a bit of personalization in the form of graffiti was still visible in each from the hall. One of the cells was filled with repeated images of stick figures sporting giant erections. Some of the stick figures were replete with conical breasts, but regardless they all had erections. A few hard-ons were dripping with either pre-cum or blood, hard to say which, as the artists had only a single shade of black ink to create with.

Some of the grateful dead had souls. Or maybe some of them were cold and dark inside as these cells' tar-colored walls. There was no use romanticizing these chaps, no use trying to pretend that they were innocent in even the attenuated sense that relieved them of moral choice in the face of their intransigent nature.

Death Trip 16

"Even their mothers didn't care about 'em," Bones said to Harry when confronted with the emptiness of the cells but offered no proof whatsoever that this was so. Likely they were consigned to these cells because they were famished of care. But this didn't mean that somebody somewhere didn't love them. Hard to say how any human could stay alive without love. Hard to say how the mere act of sustaining oneself through freezing days could continue unabated when the objective proof of one's insignificance was presented to one at every turn. Even snakes were nurtured, after a fashion. Hard to say how it had come to such a ruinous end for these men even as their own pity was entirely self-directed.

They got what they deserved for the most part. But their absence still haunted even disinterested parties as they passed by their cages.

"It's an opportunity for reflection at the very least," Bones said to Harry and took his Nikon in hand. He intended to use an entire roll on the stick figures on the way out. They were like the Cave Paintings of Niaux to his jaundiced eye. They were a bridge to a foreign consciousness drawn by unknown men.

To Bones, they argued not for man's dominion over nature but rather his place in it.

"Whoever it was, he had talent, he had a soul," Bones had told Harry once that cell was passed. Well, to hear one of the guards tell it, the man who had lived in this cell over the course of his appeals process had a tattoo created for every child he had raped then murdered. Not a pleasant sort, he. According to the guard, the stick figure sketcher was the foremost monster on Andrew Jackson Penitentiary's Death Row. No screw was allowed to journey to his cell without accompaniment. On the rare occasions he was allowed to venture outside, no screw in his immediate vicinity was allowed to turn his back on him.

Men sentimentalize other men in death invariably. This was according to Andrew Jackson's senior death row guard

and execution program manager, O.A. "Billy" Shriver. After this declaration, Billy set the bottle of glue down that he had been manipulating for the better part of an hour while waiting for his guests to appear. Distracted as they had been with the holy visions of the afterlife, impromptu photographic sessions and ersatz drug drops through a hole in black trousers, his guests' tardiness was inevitable. Billy didn't know the particulars of their waywardness but he assumed they were up to no good. They were quite a pair these two, especially in the ultra-conservative confines of the prison. Viewed from the perspective of your average redneck screw, they were on the wrong side of the facility's ubiquitous iron bars.

One of them had holes in his earlobes to accommodate garish earrings presently missing. While the other one might as well have been a zombie, given his downward cast expression and the way he reeked of a formaldehyde-like substance.

"Y'all feel sorry for these men but you have no cause to do so," Billy Shriver told them once they had crowded into his tiny cubicle on the far side of Death Row. On his desk now was a model of the afterlife he was gluing together out of cotton swabs. Dedicated to the destruction of only a single individual, he had time on his hands for such devotion. He had a rickety pearly gate all built except minus the pearls.

The humidity of this place was infiltrating the tensile strength of the cotton swabs, causing all of heaven to take on a diagonal, expressionistic bent. This effect appeared ironically intended to all parties present but Billy Shriver. To him, it appeared as cause for deep concern and even slightly blasphemous. He wouldn't allow his devotional creation to remain this way. He was slightly annoyed at the two journalists' presence. As, if only for the sake of his own immortal soul, he would have liked to be given the opportunity to remedy the faulty architecture.

The Lord Jesus Christ's hirsute countenance in addition was particularly downcast because of its water-logged

Death Trip 18

materials. Having been acclimatized to this area long ago, Billy hadn't been especially aware of the humid air's noxious properties. He sweated profusely from dawn to dusk, but he assumed that this was the way of all flesh. The wood out here if left untreated was assumed as rotten by default. Sinkholes opened spontaneously in this part of the world, driven by the process of limestone erosion. Down here, everything was being given over to the water, to the infernal crashing of waves upon shifty beaches. Such erosion argued against any pristine notion of the Eternal. In Harry Cain's reckoning, northern Florida was as far away from heaven as you could get.

All the Christs you tended to encounter down here generally were of the puritanical, Aryan, retributive variety. Never bothered by an artistic cliché, Billy Shriver too was attempting such a rendering of his savior, if only out of reverence.

"It sags because it was once alive," Harry Cain told Billy as he watched him fuss with the Christ's noodly limbs. He was speaking of the swabs' cotton material, and the fact that it was water-soluble. But perhaps Sergeant Shriver (for such was his appellation around here) thought Cain was indulging in the type of subtle blasphemy so prevalent in the mainstream culture nowadays. Folks on TV spoke ill of the Lord so freely, Billy saw that they were barely aware that they were doing so. The show on the Comedy Central channel he had inadvertently witnessed days before, *South Park*, featured crudely drawn children taking the Lord's name in vain at an interval of once every forty-three seconds (he had taped the show and put a stopwatch to it in case objective evidence was required). He had written a protesting letter to the show's New York-based network signed with his own blood. No, it wasn't his blood. It was a red dye and Caro syrup concoction that he knew of from his early days as a horror movie maven in Gainesville before being Saved. He wanted to light into these city boys to let 'em now he was motherfucking serious

about Eternal Life. He thought *South Park* violated FCC decency standards at a minimum. He thought there were tens of millions of people just like him that would say the same thing about them if only they had the time to do so.

He received nothing like a response back from Comedy Central. But this didn't mean he thought he had gone unheard.

"You and I don't live in the same country," Billy said to Harry and put the model back in the drawer it had been pulled out of an hour before. He had been working on the model for the better part of a month now with the intention of passing it to the condemned, Charles Kilpatrick, before the hour of his demise. Well, Charles hadn't asked for it. Not hardly. And just as it was handed off to him it might well be smashed against one wall of his cell. Charles was like that: mercurial and prone to sudden fits. He wasn't right in the head. Even his appellate lawyer would only talk to Charles presently behind the protective glass of the AJMSP Visitor's Center. Billy thought he was somebody beyond saving, actually. Merely he was trying to protect him from himself. The lady lawyer wanted him to see a shrink so that he could be administered tranquilizers. She wanted him doped up if he ever had to go in front of a judge again.

Charles Kilpatrick had a mouth that ran ahead of his reason. The first step in the appellate lawyer's strategy was to get him another stay. She wanted to exploit the idea that he was, in a way, mad. He had gotten in a fight during childhood and bounced the back of his head on the pavement. She wanted a brain scan performed on him. She wanted to keep him alive long enough for a renowned head trauma expert to be brought in from Japan.

At that point she assumed his sentence would be commuted to consecutive life terms. She had a strategy that didn't involve Charles testifying for himself. But as his eyes could burn holes in you from across the room, she wanted Charles doped up in the courtroom. He couldn't help himself,

he claimed, with the glaring. One dirty look passed in the judge's direction, the lawyer was sure, and Old Sparky could be dusted off properly.

According to Billy Shriver, only Christ Jesus could redeem a wayward soul. So, if Mr. Kilpatrick was looking for some semblance of mercy from the universe, he needed to train those dark eyes not on Florida's renowned justice system so much as the Lord himself dwelling within him like some previously undetected vital organ.

"You don't work in this place and see Jesus work His miracles daily on the possessed like I do," Billy told Harry Cain. (Bones standing in the tiny room's center had faded from ordinary view. Surely even if he had been relocated, he wouldn't have been able to internalize what was being explained to him. He was like that sometimes, distant as the moon. Eventually he would fade back in and then be re-recognized by the universe. He would be reckoned at such a point as a more or less normal person apart from his cultivated aura of gloom. Others would have negative opinions of him and assume him as a sort of damaged soul. Presently they assumed him as Nothing at All. They recognized him only as an intimate presence. In a true social sense, they didn't assume him as real. It was a weird affect that only he alone on this planet had seemed to master: A negative type of charisma. Or maybe he hadn't mastered it at all. Rather, it was a malady that had come upon him suddenly like the bubonic plague.)

A dull screaming momentarily that had bled through the concrete from another wing into Shriver's office was ignored by all parties.

"Consult the historical record if you don't believe me," Shriver told Harry. "Jesus lay entombed for over two days. And on the third day He rose. Yes, the resurrection! He rose! The Hebe women rolled the stone away. Rolled the stone away I say! And Jesus was vanished. No part of his body was ever found! No, not so much as a goldarn toenail! Poof, gone!

Death Trip 21

And this, you should realize, don't happen usually. And it don't matter really what you all think about it. This is human history! Look it up! This is not an event a man like you who trades in rumor should take lightly at all."

Men screaming was a common prison sound. It was like the chirping of crickets in a summer field. Even tyro Harry Cain by this point had grown used to it. It was at best a minor irritant for them all to be talked over. To even mention it, given the circumstances, would invite the charge that one was changing the subject. They were all for reasons of their own proceeding with the business at hand. They didn't enjoy each other's company especially. They were all trying their best to professionalize the situation. They were all trying to be out of each other's' presence as quickly as they might.

Nevertheless, that which was genuine in Sergeant Shriver's view needed to be given a higher designation than that which was merely speculative or even grounded in demon-produced delusions.

The women who had witnessed Jesus' resurrection into a form of what might be called Pure Spirit were in no particular order: Mary, Another Mary, Mary the Wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, Salome, and a uncertain Jewess named Joanna that few knew much about but was mentioned in the Biblical record so is thus a revered presence in the Sergeant's accounting and whose name thus should never be taken in vain.

"You of all people," Shriver said to Cain with the disgust evident in his voice, "should be willing to entertain the possibility that death is not the end of the journey."

Harry Cain wasn't going to let that observation pass unchallenged.

"Why me of all people?"

"I can see the Satanic darkness in your eyes," Billy said to him. "Just like so many of the inmates on this row. You're haunted by things, by the possibility of all that might be," he said to him. "So you have a sense that things are not the way

they seem in this world, that there are hidden layers to them. You've seen hell or had its existence intimated to you. This by itself I think makes you a sort of backwards believer. It makes you somebody at least who is willing to entertain the possibility that God exists. Which sets you one step ahead maybe of those who have never given the subject much thought. But you need to take the next logical step in your life and sink to your knees. You'll never receive any help without first asking for it. And you'll never be able to ask for it properly without first believing in your heart that this is required of you: to live free of the dread you daily experience in yourself."

Not that he believed Shriver could sense all this about him instinctively, but his overall assessment hit home with Harry Cain, at least enough to engage him further on the subject.

"How do you square your Christian faith," he asked the Sergeant, "with your duties as the chief executioner for the State of Florida?"

According to Billy Shriver, he and the State of Florida helped with the spiritual reformation of select barbaric individuals by confronting them with the terror of death for extended periods while they were confined in a cell.

"It comes time to take the final walk down the hall there's not a one of them with a spring in his step," Billy Shriver said. "Might be the cruelest man on earth going in but it comes time to take that walk they're docile as a veal calf," he said. "They get softened up in the litigating process," he said, "especially when their appeals have been exhausted over the last three days," he said. "The governors for the State of Florida we've had have been good enough to announce in advance that sentence commutation's been denied for all death row inmates since 1983. There's a phone to the governor's office that nobody's checked to see if it's worked yet. This all serves to focus the condemned mind onto the task at hand."

Before continuing, Sergeant Shriver cleared his throat. This was so as to move all impurities from his passageway.

"I truly believe," he told Harry, "that a man can be Saved in the blink of an eye. It's a simple enough transition from damned to saved. It is entirely dependent on letting Christ into your heart. Don't need to say or utter a word as long as your heart's open. On the other hand, vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord. I say my prayers every day and put my faith in Christ. It's all up to him what he intends to do with me. I don't have a say in the matter."

If it was up to Billy, he told Harry, every man would be Saved before the impulse to spill the blood of another had come upon him. In this way every prison would be rendered obsolete in an eye blink. But there was evil in this world. And the Lord must have had a reason for letting it remain. There's no rhyme or reason to it from a mortal perspective. But because it's there it must be warred against. This was his role in the Great Scheme. He was God's Executioner. He was somebody who Saved souls by remitting flesh to its rightful owner.

"Prisoner gets a last meal of his choice along with a visit of the prison chaplain if he so desires," Billy told Harry Cain who had finally produced his miniature tape recorder to take notes. It wasn't that he was uninterested in anything Sergeant Shriver had to say. It was that for the most part he was an unschooled practitioner of journalism. He had started writing less than four years back when his grunge rock band, *Raising Cain*, broke up. The freelance assignments he received nowadays were too few and far between for him to be able to cultivate a real professional sheen to his duties. He was a good writer but a bad reporter. There were always gaps of knowledge in his articles that he would have to paper over with incontestably entertaining anecdotes concerning his decadent past spent in a hard rock band.

He knew enough about journalism to feign interest in his interviewee if only to get him or her talking.

Death Trip 24

"What if they order something out of season," Harry asked him. "What if they order pheasant in duck season? Will they delay the execution on that account?"

Shriver ignored the question and stared out the tiny window of his cube. The loading dock was twenty feet below and a hog farmer's flatbed was backed up to the space where food trucks were usually parked.

"You know when it's the day before an execution," he said to Harry, "when the pig shit smell hits you between the eyes with both barrels. Takes you back to the matter at hand," he said, "at least around here."

Around here, that is, in this particular correctional facility, the poison gas was reserved strictly for the rodent population and the reinforced rope for the tug-o-war competition at the annual employee picnic held in the park nearby.

"No gassings ever in this part of the state," he told Harry Cain, "because of one governor's contention that it was too great a threat to prison personnel who would be forced to handle and store the gas on prison grounds."

The noose they didn't use anymore too, said Shriver, since a successful appeal on the part of a four-hundred-pound inmate who claimed its force would result in his decapitation (as opposed to a mere broken neck).

"This cracker's lawyer brought in diagrams and an expert witness to support his case, I recall," Billy said. "A physicist from the University of Florida too," he said and giggled. "According to the physicist, it was all a matter of pressure to the neck. We offered to put the son of a gun on Weight Watchers prior to his climb to the gallows but this too was rejected. This is the ACLU for you," he said. "Your tax dollars in action. So now if the condemned catch so much as a cold we have to delay. We have to have a doc on call twenty-four hours just in case an Eighth-Amendment complaint can be lodged. But the good news is real clemency has never been granted. Not in this state. It's not as if the fat son of a gun

was allowed to get away with anything even as this one appeal proved successful.”

Indeed, this corpulent con and all others who passed in his footsteps were subjected to the tender mercies of Old Sparky, the maple wood electric chair delivered to this prison from New Jersey care of Thomas Alva Edison himself in 1924. Owing to a raft of bad publicity concerning his invention's cruel ministrations, the great inventor came down here to oversee its installation and first use. According to him, the screw in charge had over-watered the sponge placed on the apex of the condemned's shaved head. No, no, no, T.A. cried! Two ounces maximum in a completely dry medium! The Wizard of Menlo Park had written the manual that accompanied the chair's bill of material. He had made a point of bringing his own sponges with him from New Jersey and demonstrating their placement. The executioner and presiding physician should make sure to check the level of moisture being employed. He said that if rivulets of water could be detected rolling down the prisoner's face, the execution should be delayed. He said that a drying medium like a bath towel should be present at all times during the electric chair's use. Dry the wood surface first and make sure the prisoner's jumpsuit is dry. Never knew what sort of mischief one of these devils would pull if only to declare that they were wronged. They would be burnt and supremely damaged on the first application of AC current, but not killed. Then they would plead to a judge that their constitutional rights had been infringed upon. To them it would be worth the pain even as to others it was a gross spectacle and an infringement on basic good taste. The presence of their burning flesh, that is. They were rascals up until the very end. They lived to cause their jailers pain.

Now, of course, Mr. Edison had intended his AC-powered electric execution device to intentionally cause grievous harm to those who were unfortunate enough to be in its embrace. Much to his surprise, even as the horror surrounding the

Death Trip 26

device mounted, so too did the demand for it. The fact that it was cruel and unusual punishment became a selling point almost.

The problem was that so many witnesses to the execution were being routinely sickened by the smells associated with its successful operation. For the first few decades of its operation, wardens had assigned surgical masks to all those unfortunate to be in the room with the burning bodies. These weren't effective. Increasingly purchasers of the expensive product were demanding an extended warranty. But, according to Edison, by the 1920s all the bugs in the contraption had been worked out. It had everything to do with the amount of water in the sponge. According to him, it was a simple matter of accurate calibration.

They had nicknamed this particular chair Old Sparky in the 1940s according to an unofficial prison history because of its penchant to short out at times of maximum application.

"Rats in the walls having eaten through a lot of the dedicated wiring," Billy told Cain upon their short journey to the death chamber. You see, as dictated by recent federal decree, a test run of the chair was required prior to its actual use. They had purchased two hogs from the Sunshine, Florida hog farmer to fulfill this requirement. It was Sergeant Shriver's job to oversee the test and sign off on the affidavit stipulating that the equipment was in working order.

Used to use adult chimps for this job. These had been stored in a downstate preserve after their use as television curiosities had been exhausted. Somehow this practice was judged to be a heinous abuse of animals. Likely because chimps reminded us too much of ourselves. So, a short slide down the evolutionary chain was required. By edict they needed to sacrifice a mammal approaching two hundred pounds. They needed to test the identical procedure on this creature that they would use on the condemned in twenty-four hours.

The problem with hogs, however, was that they're far more intelligent than the average dog and would resist with all their considerable might once the second the primary electrode was fitted in place.

"They have hooves also while we have hands," Shriver told Harry who had successfully avoided rolling his eyes. Well.

That was to say, when electrocuting a hoofed animal there was a greater amount of mass (and therefore electrical resistance) at its extremities. Therefore, a higher amount of voltage was required. So, the calibration for a human would *always* be off — to the detriment of the human.

They would invariably use too much juice and inflict massive burns on the condemned's upper torso prior to the heart stopping. The warden knew this. But he was bound by decree to apply the specs derived from the animal test. If somebody asked either him or Billy Shriver what had gone wrong, he would calmly explain the situation to them. Blame it on the blasted judge, on the ACLU. There was an art to this whole effort of man-killing. Many anti-death penalty types were ignorant of it. An inquiring journalist, therefore, needed to go to the source. To the prison officials who actually knew what they were doing. You needed twenty-two hundred volts at 12 amps extended for two minutes to send an adult male swine to hog heaven. With people, the humane thing to do was reduce these numbers at thirty second intervals up until the moment of cardiac arrest.

When a live human body burns, the sergeant told his half-interested interviewer, the smells are disquieting enough to cause even war veterans like himself to gag and wretch past the point that it could be seen as a demonstration of ordinary squeamishness. It was rather something that revealed a soul in fear-and-trembling, sickened by the revelation of what life truly was.

"Unintentional positive outcome is that all these roughhewn characters with facial tattoos will gentle down a

bit once the aroma of fried person circulates to their cell," Shriver told Cain checking on his key chain for the right key to gain entrance inside. You would have thought he would have identified the key easily enough simply through its constant use. He seemed to prefer to search for it, however. It gave him a sense perhaps that his entrance into this room was ultimately earned and was part of a quasi-religious ritual. As if he was a temple priest having gained entrance to America's *sanctum sanctorum*, the death chamber. To Harry and Bones, such uncertainty made him appear like a rube, however. It made him appear like somebody less than competent.

The Warden had, according to Billy, purchased several heavy duty industrial fans that would be activated immediately after every executionee's death warrant was signed. They wanted the aroma of an effective electrocution spread out into the entire population of Andrew Jackson. They wanted these so-and-so's to know where they were exactly.

All the shouts of "dead men walking" and "fuck the man" upon a death row's inmate walking to the execution chamber had bothered the Warden to no end, according to Billy Shriver.

"These cons think it's an occasion for celebrating like Thanksgiving," he said. "That is, until they get themselves a whiff. Once they do, generally they gentle down considerably. Usually the next day we bring in a preacher to hold forth on what's what and What Will Be. We want to bring them to Jesus while they're soft and fearful. Usually the effect lasts two days and then they're back to the same old same old. They're not reflective souls generally, these men," said Shriver. "If they had any self-awareness to call upon, you'd have to assume they wouldn't have wound up in prison from the start."

But, on the other hand (and this was a point Cain had tried to make to the executioner within a minute of meeting

him), some men on death row were truly victims of circumstance.

Finding the six-inch key that turned the heavy door, Billy hesitated a moment. "How'd ya mean," he asked him.

"They get involved with drugs, maybe," Harry said. "Then they're drugs addicts that turn to crime. Like, they're victims of the system, too."

Once entering the room, the stench of a two hundred-pound Kunekune with its legs taped to its sides assaulted the two journalists as if a blow to the cranium with a blackjack. As it was still alive they hadn't expected that the smell would be as overpowering as all that. It smelled like the goddamn thing had been electrocuted weeks ago and had been left to rot in an open field before being dragged back into the tiny chamber.

Billy turned back to Harry Cain before he turned toward the pig.

"Mister," Billy said to Harry, "If you really believe what you just stated to me then all hope is lost. Not just for you, I mean for us all. If you really believe there's nobody to blame, there's no sense for any of us going on anymore."

The hog's screaming was entirely off-putting, but its rotting scent was worse. A portable winch and pulley apparatus was being set up by the Sunshine farmer to lift it into the oak chair. Once there, it would be injected repeatedly with phenobarbital until it went limp enough for the electrodes to be attached. It would be propped up vertically with even more electrical tape and then the switch would be thrown. For some reason, the tranquilizing of the pig was required to be done at the very last minute. After two minutes of exposure to the juice, the prison doc would come in and search for a heartbeat. If none was found, the carcass would be wheeled into the kitchen for butchery. Very efficient operation, this. According to Billy Shriver, they could go farm to table with one of these creatures in less than six hours.

Death Trip 30

Soon Billy Shriver decided that Harry was just trying to get his goat when speaking of the violent offender as victim. Perhaps Cain was somebody to be pitied like the children born without tongues in their mouths so that they would be required to eat a thin protein paste for the remainder of their days.

"Stick around: we'll cut a tenderloin for ya," he said to Cain and smiled. He had let himself in on the joke lately. Even if it was not a joke, he assumed it as such and let himself in on it. Life's too short for these types of skirmishes with men transient enough to not even require names. He thought of Bones in particular as a patently ridiculous sort. He saw him as a type of type of downscale Pinocchio almost, as a type of inanimate doll come to life.

Nothing to be over-frightened about certainly with him or even with the pictures he had started to snap ever since the chamber had opened up and the hog had lunged at them detecting perhaps another tormentor worthy of being run through with non-existent tusks (their removal resultant from a thousand-year program of domestication of which presently it stood as victim).

Seeing the animal there in its bound and tortured glory had brought out the visual poet in Bones. Once the chamber door had been opened, he started in snapping away with his Nikon SKG, loading and unloading rolls of film expertly as if he were a war hardened GI manipulating ordinance and his camera was a WW II-era howitzer.

"I got three rolls of the pig alone," he told Harry once back in their adjoining rooms of the Flamingo Motel on the service lane of I-10. This was the road they would eventually take west to make the next leg of their death trip. Lettuce-bearing trucks rattled the room's flimsy walls as Bones held forth, causing him every so often to clutch at his Dixie cup filled with Tanqueray on the nightstand. As they were in a dry county now, the booze that they had imported was at a premium. Hard to say where you could buy within the I-10

corridor during the hours Bones was habituated to. So, they were taking no chances. The trunk of their rented Buick Regal was laden with spirits of every stripe. Bones had done the buying for them both, revealing a fondness for British gin. Gin got you drunker faster than any other spirit on the market, according to him. More so was its versatility for use in cocktails. But he never failed to drink his gin neat, sometimes taking pulls straight from the bottle. He was deeply uncouth in this tendency, Harry found, a long time drunk whose rationales for his drinking had of late failed him. He glugged it down as if he was slurping tap water. Sometimes the gin would run out of the side of his mouth and this Bones found distressing in the extreme. He needed to slow down to metabolize every drop. He needed to mix it with grapefruit juice on occasion, so he wouldn't appear so alcohol-dependent to those who were drinking with him.

It was the pig's face that haunted Bones more than any bit of assaultive sense data that he had encountered within the relatively brief period that they were consigned to the Flamingo Motel.

"I saw the folds in its skin near the eyelids," he said to Harry wishing he had brought his dark room equipment with him. No room in the Buick, with all the bottles, you see. Also, he was contemptuously ignorant of the new digital technology. Part of the photographer's art according to him resided in the processing of developing film. Years ahead he would have a tough time making the jump to digital if it ever was demanded of him. Nowadays when a client wanted a .jpg he would have to run to a Kinko's to make a high-resolution scan. He didn't know shit about computers. Didn't know, didn't care. He was an admirer of the Old Ways. Culture started downhill once TV became popular.

The Kunekune, according to Bones, had soulful crinkles at the corner of its eyes that betrayed far more emotion than did the eyes of the average human.

Death Trip 32

"He damn well knew what was happening to him," he said to Harry who had lately gone to their shared bathroom in this suite to fetch for himself a Dixie cup. He was not especially partial to gin, but beggars should not be choosers. Maybe an hour later he would walk off to the vending machine area and buy a Diet Sprite as a mixer. He had a stash of magic mushrooms at his disposal that, given the presently fragile circumstances of his mental health, he had resolved to flush down the toilet at his nearest convenience. He hadn't really planned this whole trip out as thoroughly as Bones. He had been dreading its arrival at some level which gave him cause to not plan for it.

The hog had a hog name, most likely. And various hog friends who might commiserate with it over its present predicament.

"It had the notion that great pain was going to come unto it absent of the relief of death," Bones said to Harry Cain and began to take direct pulls on the gin bottle. Perhaps it was the memory of what he was describing that was driving him to such robust imbibing. Perhaps merely it was a force of habit. As Bones wasn't the most empathetic soul around. He was in so many things a truly hard case. Chances were, even his own death would not be such a tragedy for him. It might well be a cause for celebration, depending on how drunk he was at the time.

He was fascinated by the pig's distress more than he was about whatever cruelty was being rendered unto it in the name of humane treatment of another.

"As it went to sleep," he said, "I could see it try to squeal up until the point that it lost consciousness."

To Bones this meant that the squealing was its entire focus. It would have rather screamed than breathed if given the choice. And if it had been awakened, it would have resumed its protests immediately as if never having been knocked out at all.

At the directive of Sergeant Shriver, they hadn't stuck around to watch the test execution of the hog.

"They thought it would reflect poorly on them," Harry told Bones concerning the appearance of all the blackened skin and the starting and stopping to check for a heartbeat after the latest electric interval had been applied. They were savvy enough to know that this article Harry was writing for *Filth*, America's foremost hipster rag, would not be complimentary or even fair-minded. Billy Shriver wanted to limit the damage by limiting the exposure. Shriver had made up a story about exposure to trichinosis being a concern for all non-prison personnel once the flesh on the Kunekune began to flay. This was indefensibly preposterous. Once challenged, Shriver had not bothered to defend the assertion. He simply gestured for them to leave and made a move to his Taser. Nothing to be done by Harry and Bones at that point. The press liaison at the Florida Bureau of Prisons was a hundred miles away in Tallahassee. They had no one to complain to. They might as well have been in a foreign country, devoid of the protections of the Bill of Rights. They could complain to the prison spokesman but to dull effect. Nobody with any real power wanted them down here, most significantly the prison's warden. As they were being escorted out, Billy Shriver had intimated that they were in over their heads. He said this while gripping his Taser tight. An industrial model 20130 at that, whose recommended use was for emergency situations only. Regardless, he knew far better than either Harry or Bones when he was allowed to use it. He had told them to keep on walking and that's exactly what they did. Perhaps in the next prison over they would get a warmer welcome. Likely they would have to prove first that they weren't the threats to order they appeared to be.

As the hog's death was shielded from the Fourth Estate's circumspect gaze, Officer Shriver had, once they were all relocated to the Visitor's Center, announced that the execution

of Charles Kilpatrick would be off-limits to all *Filth* magazine staff on orders of Governor Bush himself.

"He seen your work and he don't like it," Billy had told them by way of a complete explanation. Harry Cain wasn't aware that the free Brooklyn-based publication circulated south of the Mason-Dixon line and told this to Shriver.

"Take it up with him yourself, if you don't like his decision," Billy Shriver said and walked back to the prison's restricted area. He said that there was a closed-circuit feed of the execution whose recording could be made available to journalists within the space of forty-eight hours. To him, it was a suitable substitute. But to Harry it argued against coming down here at all. The smell in particular and the sound of watching a man being electrocuted would have been lost irrevocably from a muted feed. It would render the event antiseptic and thus not persuade anybody about its inherent evil. Just another TV show in other words with an all too predictable ending. To Harry this was obvious. And likely it was obvious to Governor Bush too. Not that he had ever voted for the oily son-of-a-bitch nor would he ever, but he was disappointed in him. He thought death penalty fans should hold to the courage of their convictions. He thought they should throw such events open to the public and let the people decide for themselves.

Too many grotesque recounts of botched or partially botched deaths by electric chair to consider for Jeb to make the brave call on such an event.

"The first man to die in such a way, William Kemmler, had to be shocked repeatedly to get his heart to stop," Harry, who had done his research on this subject, said to Bones and the green bottle of Tanqueray that had seemed to have become a permanent facial feature like a gangrenous oral blastulae extending from his lips. He suspected the technology and procedures regarding this method of execution had not advanced much since the late nineteenth century, but lacking access it was hard to tell. The prison was

hiding something from the public, in other words, attempting to cover up from the gross violence they were in the midst of perpetrating. At Kemmler's death, for example, the press who had been invited had literally lost their lunch as a result of what they had just seen. A fried eyeball at one point had slipped from Kemmler's socket and hung there in space like a boxing announcer's microphone. Save the scheming Edison, it was not what anybody wanted.

Kemmler's murderers were trying to promote themselves as types of elevated justice-bringers. They wanted to divorce themselves from capital punishments' retributive origins and promote a humane way of execution. But the electric chair was far crueler than the guillotine. Society had devolved in terms of its conduct toward the condemned from the Reign of Terror forward but wouldn't admit it. The promulgators of this atrocity were unreflective Americans with smiles stamped on their faces. They couldn't call a spade a spade. They couldn't admit that they had made a mistake.

Cain was no crusading journalist and had no mandate from his publisher to editorialize on behalf of the condemned.

"I wanted to describe merely and let the images speak for themselves," he told Joe Arridy once more before him (albeit in a diminished capacity, once in bed around three am on his side of the suite).

He was now quite drunk. The magic mushrooms he had been toting with him had been flushed one after the other in the room's half-functioning toilet just before bed. Disappointed by Joe's reappearance initially, by this point he had become resigned to him. He was standing in the room's open closet silently leaning on the threshold. He didn't seem to want anything just then of Harry. He was here to lend an ear apparently. Or maybe he was waiting for the right opportunity to opine.

Likely Warden Johnson was standing behind him in the closet, lobotomized and unresponsive, crouching by the room's ironing board, waiting for a cue to enter.

"There's no use in us showing up here if we're going to be barred from the big event," he said to Arridy who seemed to be sympathetic about the complaint. On the TV that he had left on to drown on the motel's noise, an anonymous CNN reporter was in the Mesopotamian desert searching for a stash of poison gas or fissionable material.

The television was off mute. But somehow and suddenly no sound was filtering through to Harry.

"The point of it all was to see and feel," he said to Joe. You want to stare at a person as it's happening and watch it take place. You want to see the change occur, see the twenty-one grams fly off to wherever it might be it flies off to."

He thought they would have better luck once in Alabama, if only because he had spoken to that prison's warden personally.

"Some craftsmen are proud of their work, others less so," he told Arridy then closed his eyes. The eye was still there in his stomach's pit, felt by Harry as a type of slight discomfort on his left side. He could palpate the area and run his finger over the stub of the optic nerve. He thought if he pinched it he could separate it from whatever roots it had sprouted already. He was sure, however, that this would result in his death. Or maybe an immediate descent into raving madness. He was obliged as of now to let things play out. He was empty of answers as far as why what was happening was happening.

He didn't think he was an especially sinful person despite his history of drug abuse. He didn't think he was worthy of extended punishment. He believed that somehow for the condemned, seconds before death swooped down upon them, a type of clarity would be gained. He believed that their struggle was his struggle. In that they were essentially bad people trying to remain alive by any means necessary, just like him. In that death was a type of madness that one entered involuntarily because of the machinations of a semi-fascist state.

Don't get him wrong. A man like Charles Kilpatrick was a sick fuck. In a way, he would receive a just end tomorrow at midnight.

"We have more answers at this point than questions," Harry Cain said, mostly to himself. He experienced the feeling of sinking into the mattress as if the floor had suddenly grown as insubstantial as the visions that intended to torture Harry through the night. Closing his eyes, he became convinced at one point that he had sunk through the mattress entirely to the dingy carpeting below. Dante Alighieri was beside him, chanting a bit of *Inferno*. He thought of Kilpatrick strictly in terms of the photos he had beheld of him. He had a shaved head and the tattoo of a giant tarantula printed on it. With its hairy legs dripping down to each corner of his face over the scarred upper lip then down to a lantern jaw where there awaited another tattoo of a pale green web, it made a sure impression:

*Vidi e conobbi l'ombra di colui
che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto.*

Hate to see a boy like that remain alive. But then again — and here was truly an original thought coming from Harry — it might have been all part of a deeper cosmic plan born of the Creator of Compassion. Cain assumed a higher power was in control based on the evidence that he himself wasn't in control.

To a slow-witted Joe Arridy, Harry explained that there were far fewer answers in this world more than questions.

Joe replied, "Picture yourself in that chair with the electrodes being put in place. Now recall what you just said. You are not the measure of all things. Just because it makes sense to you doesn't mean it will to anybody else."

Harry did not sleep well afterward.

At four fifteen that morning Cain caught the image of the same bug-eyed CNN correspondent as during the previous

evening. He was reaching for his gas mask as the ordinance began to fly.

“In ancient Hyperborea there’s a city made entirely of the bones of the vanquished,” Harry said to the correspondent and drifted asleep. The purpose was to dream of a new world altogether. There is no God more exalted than the Truth, after all. There are ancient cities populated by chalky root races waiting for uncovering. We all merely need to reach out and find.

Chapter Two: June 8, 2003

(Hardsell, Alabama)

Harry's band, *Raising Cain*, never had a hit, never charted a single all throughout its tumultuous eight-year existence.

"We're the empty threats/devoid of regret/swimming in stagnant seas," the condemned's defense lawyer, Valentine Coverdale, shouted at Harry after meeting him and Bones at a truck stop parking lot in the charmless town of Hardsell, Alabama. Hard in the shadow of the state pen where the hanging would take place in three days, Valentine was searching out distractions. He had given up on the case, more or less. He had an appeal for a stay into the governor's desk based on the behavior of the district attorney.

The D.A. had many ties to various right-wing hate groups. He had a cousin who was grand wizard of the Alabama Klan.

Justice is blind but seldom dumb. This was the motto on a pine placard sitting upon Valentine's overstuffed desk back in his Birmingham office. What it meant to say was "...blind but seldom dumb, *simultaneously.*" Val's autistic son, Thad, had given him the placard as a remnant of summer camp arts and crafts. The adverb proved elusive to Thad, owing to that he had run out of room on the placard. The letters had been burnt in place via a magnifying glass. Thad was too impatient and emotionally unstable to throw the pine block out and start again.

Death Trip 40

According to Valentine Coverdale, Alabama was an even harder case than Florida, which was seemingly doing its best to outstrip both Mississippi and Louisiana in prosecutorial zealotry regarding death penalty promulgation.

"They got these wretches lined up on a conveyor belt," Valentine spoke of the entirety of the Deep South jurisprudence concerning many of his condemned clients. "Nowadays," he said, "I always have to stop myself in the middle of arguments and ask all those concerned: what's the hurry? They're not going anywhere are they? The mistakes in these types of cases always run one way. I frequently have to stand in front of the judge and whine: 'is there a special on dead prisoners that I haven't been made aware of yet?' What is driving this corner cutting? Is there a shortage of orange jumpsuits maybe? Do you need his cell for something other than housing the next prisoner to be given the same treatment? Are you in the midst of planning your retirement and wish to leave a clean slate for successor whenever he or she arrives?"

It was always a mistake, these outbursts, especially delivered to a southern judge in Valentine's trademark Brooklyn honk. To his opponents, it signified that he was flustered and that he was on the verge of giving in. To prosecutors, the cases' adjudication was a half-interesting game played as a type of dimly recalled obligation to some high-minded ideal. They didn't understand the emotionalism frequently demonstrated by the defense attorney. They didn't understand the cold stares being leveled at them whenever an infrequent social interaction occurred.

They were convinced of the rightness of their own stance concerning capital punishment, Valentine said, if only because of their success in maneuvering (usually black) necks inside a noose.

"They all got the god-fear in them bad in this part of the world," Valentine Coverdale said to Harry Cain only. Bones had lately crawled back into his shell by degrees, having

grown obsessed with the trajectory of an Egg McMuffin wrapper across the parking lot's asphalt plain. He couldn't be reached for comment presently. Eventually the here and now would reclaim him. Up until that moment, he was lost to the world. It wouldn't be worth it to even try to rouse him from non-being.

One of the appellate judges Valentine had to stand before in Birmingham had a replica of the Ten Commandments tablets on prominent display in his court. By way of an explanation for every decision made, the judge would simply point to the replica. He was either ignorant of or unbidden by the need to avoid a theological justification for rulings in a secular republic. A good ole boy, this jurist, who often wore a silver-plated six shooter beneath his robes "for just in case." If there was conflict between church and state in a given case, the judge would likely exclaim it was the state that should be eliminated. He was all in, vis-à-vis the serving of his terrible God. He didn't see a touch of moderation required on his part at all.

Not a great deal of nuanced thinking on display from those within the Alabama political power structure, Cain thought. As if the possessing of a moral qualm was sufficient grounds for impeachment by itself.

"Fuck this benighted state and its epic blood lust," Valentine Coverdale told Harry and waited for an Amen. Like so many others encountered on this trip, Coverdale saw Harry not as an impartial reporter, but a type of passive-activist waiting for his moment to strike. This by itself was neither bad nor good. It was merely an impression Cain, having belatedly adopted a professional veneer, felt that it was in his best interest to discourage. He assumed various bull-necked authority figures would close their yaps completely once they assumed that he was a partisan hack. With some justification they were leery of the media. At the very least, they would only talk to a reporter who convincingly feigned disinterest in his or her subject. They

knew more than they let on certainly. And on occasion even Harry felt it was tough to blame them for it.

According to Coverdale, the only journalist he had ever seen at an execution at Hardsell State was the gnomish editor in chief of *The Undertaker Times*. This trade newsletter was published in Anniston on old mimeograph equipment taken off folks' lawn the day before the garbage truck arrived.

"He comes with his little pad and pencil there in the front row and observes," Valentine said to Harry about the gnomish editor. "Fucking sits there leaning forward with his forehead near the glass as if he's watching a tie game in the bottom of the ninth. To him it's sport maybe. Or maybe he's getting pleasure from it sexually," Coverdale said. "I don't think personally there's any kind of depravity in this world too shameful anymore to be expressed in public. He thinks maybe he's keeping up appearances, that nobody's wise to him. He's got a rocket in his pocket ready to launch. Or maybe he's not doing anything wrong at all."

In his reporter's notebook, the gnomish journalist would usually render a series of sketches intended to pin down the exact moment of death for the condemned.

"He wanted to nail it precisely, to be able to locate the instant the Great Transition took place," Valentine recalled for Harry and stared off into the direction of the prison. Smokestacks had been placed there for some reason. These never emitted smoke. He didn't know if they were appendages of some physical plant or the vestigial structures of some never-mentioned crematorium that had been quietly put to the wrecking ball years before.

According to Valentine Coverdale, the journalist/editor of *The Undertaker Times* was a spiritualist of a dour stripe who ascertained God's presence readily by the scat He left behind after feeding.

"He was a deacon in his church," Valentine told Harry who was not in a position to know what that was regarding this hearsay. "He was a confirmed bachelor. And as such

alienated from the spectacle of the miracle of childbirth. So, he wanted to see the other side of God's Grace, the exiting from this world as a punishment for Adam's Sin. This for him was miracle enough," Coverdale said. "During an execution, he would place his forehead to the glass and his eyes would bug out. He wanted to take in every bit of what he was watching. Of course, it would all be over in the blink of an eye, that little bit of it he had come for," he said. "When it was finally over, he would close his eyes to revivify and begin to sketch. Amazing what he could do with his eyes closed. He was a true artist at such moments. But then again he wasn't trying for artistic quality. He wanted a *memento mori*. He didn't give a damn what it looked like to others."

According to him, and as related by Valentine Coverdale, the transition from life to death was accomplished in the span of exactly two milliseconds, somewhere after the heart stopped and the anus dilated allowing the shit to flow liberally as the widow's tears.

"He claimed the stuff of spirit had a pale blue taint to it," Valentine reported. "That it could be captured with a high-speed camera if one was ever available. "Well, it was all nonsense and I told him so on many an occasion. I told him to be more respectful of the bereaved. He was sitting in the room with them as it was taking place. The guards all knew him and treated him respectfully. They assumed him as retarded though this has never been adequately demonstrated to me. I think he was a ghoul merely," he said. "Civilized people don't find thrills in the death of others generally. But given the circumstances he was in he didn't stand out so much at all."

The articles he had wanted to write for *The Undertaker Times* all addressed the little discussed problems of how to prepare a hanged man for proper repose.

"According to him, there's much damage to the vertebrae to take care of before a proper suit could even be fitted," Valentine said to Cain and continued to stare at one

smokestack in particular in the prison. This was the one with yellow bricks interceding mysteriously within the red bricks. Valentine had always wondered how this had come to be. Was its distribution intentional? Perhaps there was another yellow structure standing nearby and the yellow bricks were merely this building's remnants. Perhaps the strange color pattern amounted to a type of unintentional visual code. The smokestack was in the midst of describing itself, communicating its own mongrel history to anybody so interested. At a certain point in its history the yellow bricks might have been a part of somebody's garage. Maybe a local school for the colored that was put to the wrecking ball after the great migration northward left this part of the world stripped of its lowest caste. Maybe somebody nearby had set a church to the flame and these were its remnants on prominent display.

Not that it was any of Valentine's concern, but he assumed a Steve Jobs-style turtleneck might have been a cure for the shattered cervical structure that seemed to concern the gnomish editor so.

"I think folks down here take their visitations excessively seriously," he told Harry after regaling him with the account of his attending one of these just off prison grounds. This was for a gas station stick-up artist named Hayes who one day had encountered a non-compliant owner and sent him to the pearly gates decades ahead of schedule. Mother and common law wife had come to the prison grounds after the hanging was finished and set to crying over the fanciful corpse like he was an innocent child on his way to Sunday school when fate had struck him down. There was no mitigation in their grief because of his criminal history. Prison officials found it unseemly in the extreme and asked them to leave. They thought the grief of the family of the innocent victim should be honored far above the grief of the family of the guilty victim, so to speak.

Valentine thought that these rednecks ought to relent to the point that they could at least detect a real sincerity in the survivors' grief. According to him, however, the arrow was moving in the opposite direction. For this upcoming hanging they had made the chapel off limits to the family of the condemned. Rather, the body would be delivered to them off sight to the destination of their choice via refrigerated truck (if the destination was within a twenty-five-mile radius of the prison). Anything more they would have to freight the cost themselves. Or let the state dispose of it in the manner that they saw fit (which was usually to bury it out back in the prison graveyard). It would be anonymous as always but with a cross on top of the dirt pile (regardless if he was a Muslim or what have you). Didn't matter in this part of the world. In Alabama we are all children of the Christian God. And if a person didn't like it let him or her do something about it.

Coverdale knew that folks down here weren't willing to rationalize their belief in the death penalty with their vociferously expressed belief in the abiding justness of the local political system.

"They got nothing to be sorry about, according to them. But their actions tell a different story altogether," Coverdale said to Harry. "I mean, you would think there'd be some semblance of decency at least in the way they treat the family. They make a big deal about justice being served but they act after the fact like it's somebody's dry cleaning they're disposing of and can't be bothered with the details. They want to play God but afterwards they want to act like everything they've done is no big deal," he said. "Doesn't give me much hope for the human race in the short run. And in the long run, I think we can all agree we're fucked regardless."

Back in the day, Cain recalled, on the advent of their first EP, one of his band members presented a song to the band entitled *We're Fucked Regardless*:

Death Trip 46

*Pray to Jesus, your imaginary friend/
And ask him to light the way/
to light the way through stygian darkness/
But you're fucked, you're fucked regardless/
You're fuuuckked regardless/
Even without permission it ends*

"I actually think your musical horizons need to expand a little bit," Harry said to Valentine Coverdale when during the natural drift of the conversation the band's discography was raised. The EP in question that this song had been taken from had sold exactly two thousand eight hundred ninety-four copies. The thousands of remainders that the band had unknowingly paid for had been shipped back to their shared residence in a working-class suburb of Detroit. They tried to melt 'em down and reclaim a few dollars on the raw material, but the noxious fumes created by the homemade smelter they had used had sent two of the four band members to the emergency room. They were fucked regardless, as it turned out. Some of these records, the non-melted ones, were still in Harry's possession, taking up room in his double-wide's living room, doubling as a coffee table on the rare occasions somebody came to visit, and a veneer of respectable living was required.

If Harry was to assign rank to his discography – and in his beta mind just before true sleep descended, he constantly did so in an associative way – he would place Raising Cain's 1993 effort *Bleak Friday* at the top of the mash. For that record they had hired a professional producer who was doing double duty at a Screaming Trees session down the hall. Apart from this pro, they had the luxury of a three week stay in the studio. Three weeks! In that amount of time they could chart songs out, change lyrics as needed, and most importantly redo lackluster performances or paper over them entirely in extended mixing sessions that was heretofore unknown to the

band that, prior to this session, had used the studio as a sparsely populated but acoustically sophisticated performance area, rented by the hour and more or less devoid of possibilities related to the sophisticated record-making that one would find, say, in a typical David Bowie session.

"For that record we had the songs worked out in advance. We had the backing of the record company and the idea that we had a receptive audience for our music," Harry told Valentine. "Which is always helpful when you're involved in any sort of collaboration. Your bandmates leave by-and-large when they think they're tapping a dry well. They panic and try to move the music in a certain commercial direction and it always comes out muddled as a result. They think they're in it for the music. But it's all about money with them. And when they wake up and they realize they've backed the wrong horse then good luck finding them again. Just the way it is actually," he said to Valentine. "It's hard to even blame them for it."

Bleak Friday was a 12-song cycle that Harry wrote weeks after a self-administered program of heroin withdrawal. It could presently be judged a qualified success.

"I went cold turkey in somebody's cabin," he said to Valentine who had encouraged him to talk about the subject. To him, this was better than the subject they had come here to discuss which was the death penalty case of Coverdale's client, a certain Rufus X. Rufus X was scheduled to be hung from the neck until dead in three days barring another stay. Really, about the case itself Valentine had nothing to say. He was battling the primal forces of nature down here. He felt his legal training insufficient to the task. Seeking to save a black man's life in Alabama was more like scaling K2 in winter than filing briefs and issuing objections. He felt an awesome indifference to his efforts on the part of the judges he found himself standing in front of routinely. Like he could drop dead on the spot and not a word of surprise or regret would be uttered on his behalf (and on behalf of his vanished soul).

He didn't think this was the way the legal system was meant to be run. He thought a type of engaged dispassion rather was required from all parties concerned rather than this uniformly cold bias wherein even his motions that came replete with multiple citations of precedent were denied if only because the magistrate didn't give a damn about any of that mincing airy-fairy precedent stuff and expected you to think as he did on this subject.

M'man Rufus was fucked, in other words, and Valentine, salt of the earth that he was, was preparing to break it to him gently and honestly. And offer his resignation as poor recompense for his failure.

"I gotta get out of this business," Valentine told Harry as they walked back into the Flying J in search of a cup of coffee. This might well be true, but it did Rufus X no good presently. If this was the way he felt about things, he should have told his client about it months before and referred him to another lawyer. Now they were both fucked. But one of them would be able to stay alive long enough to try to get un-fucked. With this in mind, a certain smugness underneath Valentine's expression of regret could be detected by an impartial observer. Harry should have known better, but with a guy like Coverdale the smugness was woven into the fabric of his being.

In fact, Valentine didn't see himself as belonging to the same species as Rufus X. He felt the need to argue on his behalf, rather, as a comeuppance unto all types of abstract authority. He was always warring against "The Man." To him, his hapless clients were simple props in a fight against Daddy. He saw himself in hopelessly romantic terms. He saw himself as somebody who cared too much to ever humble himself in the face of another man's misfortune.

There was not great pay in civil rights law, but there were certain benefits that transcended mere salary. Especially for those with an enhanced sense of self-worth such as Valentine Coverdale.

Thus, the reason for his infatuation with Harry during his Raising Cain days. Valentine saw himself as a kindred spirit with Cain's goth-metal caricature, a knight errant who failed only because of the ignorance of his peers.

He was demanding the entire story arc of Cain's artistic decline. When it came, he would listen to it raptly. At which point he would go home and believe that if it had been him he would have done so much better for himself, if only because he was the superior talent.

"I thought *Bleak Friday* was panned unfairly by certain critics, mind you," Valentine told Harry and sipped his Minty Joe. A Minty Joe tasted like a urinal cake soaked in Sanka. But there you have life in Hardsell, Alabama. One of these days a Starbucks might infiltrate the area's sparse scenery. But until that time, the Flying J was the best that one could do for a coffee house. The Flying J barista was a gap-toothed idgit sneaking peeks at the porno mags when he was supposed to be mixing drinks. The smut drew him to it with biological force. It planted the constant sexual urge in him that could be expressed aptly only in song.

(This idgit, too, had his own band, a country-rap duo named Hog Slammas. They enjoyed their swine down here in many incarnations. You milked a cow, but you ate a pig. And look: the language of love was truly universal. In Hardsell, there was no careful attending to any nuance required to make your voice known:

*Bitch, what you waiting for?/
Invitation to the playa's ball?/
My nuts on your tonsils/
Leave your shit in my car/*

*Slice your clit off with my razor watch it bleed deep and red/
Slice your clit off with my razor watch it bleed deep and red/
Uhhhhhhhh bitch uhhhh*

Death Trip 50

Harry recalled that originally the songs on *Bleak Friday* were modeled after Weil's *Oftah's Lieder*. But after the band digested them, they became far more rock-based and, therefore, generic. No better or worse than any of the grunge being released by the shovelful during that year once the major record labels discovered there was money to be made in that dark, aggrieved sound. Cain didn't think of himself as an innovator so much as a constant victim of circumstances. He kept being misunderstood. And these misperceptions became part of Harry's artistic aura. Journalists of the day would ask him questions about "his" music and he would have no answer to give them.

The problem with Raising Cain at a high level was that they were always attempting a synthesis of many things but discovered belatedly the ability to only competently perform one thing. Which was the minor-chord based rock-and-roll made famous by their fellow Michiganders The Stooges decades ago.

"We thought we were something special but now I don't hear it," Harry said to a smiling Valentine who was trying his best not to nod his head in agreement. "Something dark and profound I always imagined was in the offing, mystical simply because it had never been tried before," he said. "Like Kurt Weill and Screaming Jay Hawkins mashed together. But once everybody had had their say, the Screaming Jay Hawkins part was brought front and center, only filtered through this self-conscious white boy mentality that made it only appealing to these suburban goth kids who maybe were in the midst of trading the valium they stole from their mom's dresser for street bought speed and wanted something darker than The Cure to get high to. Well, we gave them something darker than The Cure but that was it. I mean, after you state how fucked up you are and how fucked up the world is there's nowhere really left for you to go lyrically. The genius of all art, well of anything really, lies in its subtle details. And once subtlety's been eliminated for the sake of catharsis,

everything becomes pretty much a punk cliché. Subtlety's a bourgeois concept in art, but it's deeply useful. Looking back on it we needed to find ourselves a rehearsal space somewhere remote and put our queer shoulders to the wheel. We needed to take a year or so and learn how to play our instruments up to the point that we could craft real songs and refrain from screaming at the top of our lungs at the outset of every fucking chorus."

Here was the wisdom of age seeking belated dominion over the impetuosity of youth. The problem for Harry Cain and all other semi-serious cultural laborers at the advent of the twenty-first century was that impetuosity was the dominant attribute of most cultural products that had pretensions of being art. It was far more prominent than any particular chord structure, say, or the existence of any political message be it from the left, right, or center.

"If we would have gotten serious about things, at least we would have earned back our self-respect," Harry said to Coverdale, "but we would have lost our record deal overnight. And we would have had to get day jobs just like ordinary people. Radio creeps would have made us out as adult contemporary and shoved us to the rear," he said. "Not a chance of transcendence after that. *Spin* magazine, if they had taken notice at all, would have written a dismissive column branding us as sellouts. As if trying to write lyrics that actually made sense makes you a sellout. But there we have the music press in a nut shell. They're just following the herd like everybody else. They have no real insightful perspective about music. But I have to admit I stopped taking record reviews seriously by the time I turned twenty."

Like *O'rah's Leider*, *Bleak Friday* was to have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

"Nothing pretentious, nothing too difficult to play," he said to Valentine after noting the limited musical abilities of most of the Cains collectively. Mostly it had to do with the feeling of profound disconnect with the world after he had

come off heroin. He had always had it in his mind to re-record the whole effort. He wanted to be alone in the studio with an acoustic guitar. He thought he was the only person in the world who could honestly do it justice.

Just like the nameless undertaker/editor in Valentine's recollection, Harry's aim with these songs was to try to get as close to the point of death as possible without going over the rapids himself. For him, a sober existence was a living death. As heroin addiction was a type of purgatory between life and death. But once one entered purgatory, the death that it abutted would somehow taint all the objects nearby. Now he was alive but in an entirely diminished way. At a cellular level he still recalled the circumstances of his addiction and longed to return to it. It was a pre-birth, a place below both hope and fear. At some point, of his own free will he would enter back into it with no intention of returning to the land of the living. It was an abomination in a way to be un-alive at one point and somewhat alive at another. A sort of depreciated Lazarus. Thus, he felt the need to right a wrong with a form of self-sacrifice. Death he assumed would see to him so long as he maintained his drug regimen. But to not kick heroin again he would need to have the funds to buy the product. Harry thought he could parlay the "Death Trip" articles into a book deal that would allow him to slide into addiction for good. He thought eventually he would make his solo record in Miami and retire back to his double-wide and wait for the end. Should take less than three years based on all available information. He assumed he would die of something other than an overdose. He was careful with the amounts and method of injection always. He assumed maybe there would be an impurity in the product itself that would lay him low in a violent paroxysm just like one of these unfortunate men Coverdale had just finished discussing.

Look, justice had its own timetable just like the arrival of any meaningful art. Halfway through their cups of barely drinkable coffee at this Flying J, Cain had finally recalled his

vocation neatly enough to be able to pump Valentine for details.

"If I ask you about the particulars of what's going to happen, are you going to get all weepy again," he asked Coverdale. And for the first time he realized that Bones was nowhere in the immediate vicinity.

This was a request stated as a question. He thought a nice photograph of the tearful defense attorney might nicely augment Article Two. To hear *Filth* staffers tell it, Article One had been a rousing success. Harry didn't know how they knew but this was what they claimed. At the very least they were not cutting him off. He had a contract for five articles. But realize he had no legal recourse should they decide to cut him off. *Filth's* editor was a famously mercurial sort known for his love cocaine and libertarian politics. Cain assumed the trade winds shifted quickly at his Williamsburg office simply because they had no sustainable business model to begin with and were always grasping at straws.

On the other hand (and at second thought), maybe Valentine's mug was so insincere to begin with as to work against any sympathy that your average PF Flyer wearing Weird Beard would muster over such a tearful display.

Filth readers had their bullshit detectors set to 11 at all times, so to speak. Which simply was a way of saying they were cynical beyond words. In that they needed some proof of capital punishment's at-root cruelty as opposed to merely judging it so in the abstract. They needed the smells described to them. They needed to see the bulging necrosis in images.

These were the future leaders of the New Age. Which was why, amongst many other reasons, that a revolution must be launched and the old order overthrown.

Valentine told Harry that, per Southern tradition, the hanging was scheduled for exactly midnight on the day before the Christian Sabbath.

"The reason for this is something I can't follow for myself," he told Harry. "First lesson in constitutional law is

there's a separation of church and state in this country. Supposed to be. Somebody says kill a nigger on a Thursday that's no good. They all have their evasions down here and their workarounds regarding what should be. To me it's just one more indicator of the system's overall corruption. It's a theocracy down here as fixed as the one in Iran. But you raise this point to them and they just look at you like you've beamed down from Mars. They can't work out a different way of doing things, of living their life. I always wind up in front of them saying why have a trial at all? Which is a mistake, I fully recognize, coming from a defense attorney. Somebody like you who is truly free, Cain, a poet, should actually give me pointers. I don't think I've got the hang of it yet even after twenty years in the business."

Well, Harry said, maybe this could be accomplished in different circumstances than this. Three days from now he was due in Buttfuck, Mississippi where a heavily tattooed man named Fine was preparing to be shot in the chest with five rounds from a distance of forty feet. His schedule worked against the sort of fraternization Valentine was suggesting. And he was generally nervous in courtrooms and couldn't be compelled to enter them in a purely professional capacity. The end.

But you, Bones, somebody like you could be tempted to linger in this sort of vulgar backyard. That is, if the opportunity arose to make a new friend.

Against all objective evidence, Harry thought of his photographer as an amiable sort. Somebody like him could be compelled to wander around the local area and observe. He was, after all, part of the scenery. Bones was the only person on the planet able to be part of the foreground and background at once.

You walk around this sort of place long enough, Bones was saying to Harry just after they had split from Coverdale's presence, a sort of misery ensues eventually that is like music

bleeding through too thin walls. It requires soundproofing if peace and quiet should be allowed to reign.

Trash that was scattered throughout Hardsell, Alabama's half-obliterated streets was nothing exceptional in the small threadbare southern towns they had travelled through thus far. But what was exceptional was the layer of brown dirt that existed underneath so much of the trash. As if the thoroughfares of this fair city were surreptitiously being prepped for a massive dose of urban farming. Hard to say where the dirt—which was a mixture of topsoil, decomposed paper products and pulverized brick—was actually from, but a likely explanation was that it had accrued here over the course of decades. Bits of rolled up newsprint from the 1930s advertising the latest in electric iron technology would have been visible in its mash if anyone would have been motivated enough to look. The road dirt in contrast was like the area's collective unconscious: omnipresent, tainted, and unexamined, a sort of civic joke to all those that noticed that it was there (which few had, admittedly, nowadays). There wasn't a lot of pedestrian traffic in this part of the world for various reasons. The city fathers were content to let sleeping dogs lie. They were men of faith for the most part and as such assumed the world would take care of itself. If there was something that they were required to do environmentally, the state would make sure and tell them. They weren't bashful of late about dictating the terms of governance to small municipalities like Hardsell. But the good news about this bad situation was that an excessive vigilance on their part regarding environmental protection was not required. As the oversight provided to them was so constant.

The community, moreover, didn't seem to suffer from any sort of excessive amount of civic pride, at least to the point that locals would demand to be granted relief from the pigsty that surrounded them.

"Always been this way, always more like an encampment than an actual town," Sung Si-Kyung, the town's (and the

whole of the county's for that matter) lone Korean barber said to Harry. This was twenty minutes after departing from Coverdale's presence. Harry had stopped in for a trim. He didn't need a trim but he stopped in anyway as this was one of the few establishments open in the immediate vicinity. The other being a Benjamin Moore paint dealership and he couldn't even bluff his through an explanation about why he would have dropped in there. Harry Cain had never held a paintbrush in his life. He couldn't identify any of the colors. Not red, blue, green. Nowadays, paint dealerships dealt in all these off shades like candy, brick, seafoam, stone, lapis, ocean. Collectively they sounded like a type of minimalist poem. And he wasn't in the mood hardly to shovel the detritus of high culture into the pit of another man's gaping intellect just to be sociable.

But when you went to get a haircut you were merely obliged to sit and listen. Now into the second leg of his death trip, Harry was lately troubled by ancillary events. He wanted a moment of Zen for himself. He wanted to be able to sit quietly for a short period and see the world as it was.

According to Sung Si-Kyung, it was the prison itself that made this town so grungy or reoriented. Its presence for them was a stand-in for the Abrahamic god of the Old Testament, a vengeful supernatural entity in whose presence prone subservience was not merely recommended but required. Everybody knew what went on between its walls and that some men were brought there for the single purpose of being killed, judged as surely as if the Book of Life had already been opened and read from. And condemned as surely as those not coeval with the Holy Ghost are condemned, so sayeth the inspired Word of God (WOG) somewhere in that inspired book's verbose catacombs (right next to the part perhaps where the hundred foreskins of the Philistines have been presented to King Saul. Or maybe at some place further on).

"They look up and see the prison there and think maybe we shouldn't do nothing to help ourselves," Sung said to

Harry when prepping him for a shave. Harry hadn't requested a shave but Sung thought he would shave him regardless. He was dirty with stubble. The barber felt he needed a close shave badly among other crucial enhancements. There was something crucially unclean about the visage being presented to Sung Si-Kyung. He felt it was his professional duty to rectify it. He was an especially serious barber who could be counted on to do the best for his customers as was possible given the constraints that a small town businessman like himself operated under. He felt a spiritual connection to his profession. He felt a haircut was a rite as much as a formal grooming procedure.

Man like Harry Cain, it was obvious to him, was as dirty inside as he was outside. Sung thought it was the least he could do for him, given the circumstances he found him in. He had no intention to charge Harry if it turned out he was short on funds. Let him go with God and try to relocate the path of light he had obviously strayed from before coming here. There was something in his eyes that spoke these truths to him loudly. Cain was seeing the world all too clearly just then. There was something that that was required to be done for a man like that. He would need a shave, haircut, and something else maybe. Sung's father had been an exorcist of the Shinto stripe in the old country and could have helped in this endeavor. Presently Harry was on his own. Sung felt sorry for him, therefore. He felt that he was being overburdened by his responsibility for reconstituting Harry's shattered soul (even though likely it had been his fault that it had shattered).

If he wanted to stick around and shoot the breeze with him after the haircut was over, Sung let Harry know it was OK with him. Business as he could well see was slow this time of the day. He averaged twelve heads a day and even though it was the middle of the afternoon Harry was only his second customer. Could be that the crackers around here were blacklisting Mr. Sung because of his race. Better

explanation was that folks in Hardsell did the best they could with precious little. They likely cut their own hair either over the bathroom sink or sitting still in a kitchen distracted by Wal-Mart purchased scissors operated by their kin.

"They're all superstitious but they don't know it," Mr. Sung told Harry, sharpening his straight razor on the shop's sole stop. "They look up the hill where the prison is and see something taken from the clouds," he said. "So rather than fight they give up and pray. They can't seem to think for themselves whenever there's an execution scheduled," he said. "I know when there's an execution scheduled," he said, "because there ain't any more heads that come. They don't think about their physical appearance any more when it happens. Affect 'em in a troubling way. You see them walking in a street as if they've just received a blow to the head. They would pass by their favorite child and not even recognize them for who they were."

Sung had seen it himself on so many occasions that he stopped consulting the local paper to ascertain whenever a hanging was scheduled. Instead, he could simply stare outside his own dusty storefront window and wait for somebody to trip over the little bit of crabgrass in the crack in the sidewalk near his shop's entrance. Otherwise able men who suddenly couldn't seem to put one foot in front of the other. You could stare at them and from a quarter mile off and detect the glaze that had settled over their eyes. Something awesome and celestial was occurring nearby. They could feel its emanation through the air molecules that they came in contact with. Just as in Solomon's Temple, a bit of the eternal had distended and slouched down to touch the earth. They held no malice for whoever it was meeting their end. They didn't know their names as the paper generally didn't print them. The names were inconsequential to them. Their civil rights (or whatever you wanted to call it) didn't figure in the equation at all.

They were God-fearers to an individual, intent on bringing the heavenly kingdom to earth. The easiest way to do this, they assumed, was to kill as many undesirables as they could and wait for God's chariot to arrive to reclaim them. Sort of a fake 911 call, if you will. They of course had Biblical justification for their actions. You'd have to be crazy to argue with any of 'em on a point of scripture. Likely that's what they wanted you to do. To get you into a back-and-forth on such matters so they could dazzle you with their erudition. They were fanatics. Which meant they were deeply sincere about such matters. There was not a molecule of equivocation within them regarding their sanctioning of state-sponsored murder. They thought if God had a problem with their form of retributive justice, He would surely indicate that this was so. Nothing was being done here that hadn't been done already by any other Christian society that had preceded them. No, the Bible was explicitly encouraging of this type of behavior. The hangman himself was a lay preacher who held the donation basket on Sundays. Say what you will about the type of sentences handed out in this state but, if you please, say it somewhere else. New York state for example had suspended application of the death penalty for good but some of its cities were horrors to even drive through, let alone walk through. Alabamans thought the death penalty could and should be seen as a form of societal self-defense. No reason to get all high and mighty just because you were too squeamish to proceed with a harsh application of morality. No reason to come down here with your nose up in the air trying to set these Bible thumpers straight on the way things truly ought to be. You should set your own house in order, they thought, before taking to criticizing others. At the very least you should allow the carrying of concealed weapons in your state so a store clerk, let's say, had a fighting chance at least when push came to shove.

A pacifist of the Buddhist stripe, Mr. Sung nevertheless owned three semi-automatic pistols, one of which he kept in the hollow underneath this barber chair's lift.

"I'm not saying this isn't a nice place to live," Sung told Harry backtracking from his earlier inferences while shaving him. Indeed, owing to a lengthy appeals process that the Clinton Administration had forced upon states in cases involving the Death Penalty, there were only eight executions per year that occurred in the Hardsell facility and less than twenty-seven occurring in all of Alabama. This was down considerably from its high of sixty-seven in 1990. Legal man killing being an infrequent enough occurrence that it could be countenanced by Sung if only they would clean up after themselves later. He didn't think it was such an extreme request to make, owing that they had any number of days of the year to "celebrate" their liberation from individual moral choice right around the time a hanging was to commence. Consecutive weeks would occur, nevertheless, where nothing of the sort was ongoing. Sung genuinely thought townsfolk should snap out of it and start living in the here and now rather than speculating on the presence of the Eternal in such a closed off space as Hardsell. They could, for example, foster a tourism industry. As none other than the King of Country Music, Hank Williams, hailed from Mount Olive, one county over. Of late, Hardsell had taken to cultivating pimentos on the town's outskirts and perhaps there could be a festival held in the pepper's honor of the sort Sung had seen while passing through scenic New Mexico in his one and only vacation taken in 1983. During the festival a bandstand was set up in the town and featured dishes where the pepper was on prominent display. Mr. Sung didn't eat any as he always suspected white people of food tampering. But he thought the idea of a pepper festival was sound. It might arouse the long dormant civic pride in Hardsell finally. It might cause the city manager (if such a person even existed) to get off his

hindquarters for a little while and budget for an extended cleanup and various civic improvements therein.

Never knew once roused what sort of extraordinary acts individuals were capable of. Sung, who as a toddler had been smuggled out of communist Korea at the advent of the civil war, was aware of the extraordinary acts of heroism that various people could perform if only they would look inside themselves for the strength required to be kind to strangers.

"I can see you have it in you," he said to Harry. Upon reaching for his clippers, he spied the small brown roots from the budding eye Harry had swallowed in Florida presently protruding from the follicles in the scalp.

These Sung incorrectly assumed were tougher than ordinary hairs. They would need to be trimmed with shears rather than ordinary barber scissors. Oh, he suspected what they represented and the course they would take once the organism they supported had fully gestated. He had seen the effect in some of his more downtrodden customers over the years. At that point (and at the very least) hair care would be the least of Harry Cain's problems.

The exact reason for why all this was occurring was still elusive to Harry. He had cultivated little spiritual knowledge as an adult. His long-estranged father would likely know but he had lacked the real motivation to attempt a connection. Too much of a scold, that man. As he felt the provisions of this world were the mere fruits of profligacy. Harry's father would invariably drone on and then belatedly provide the answer.

To Sung it was better to assume. He assumed that Harry Cain had gone too far and seen too much. He had stared into the abyss to the point that the abyss, not known for its manners, was staring back at him unceasingly. He doubted really an exorcist from any sort of religion could help Harry out. Suicide in his case would likely be a mere delaying of the inevitable. He assumed it imperative for this man to demonstrate courage.

Death Trip 62

He felt, furthermore, that Cain himself was aware of his dilemma. For example, Harry didn't flinch so much when Mr. Sung ran his fingers over the eye's fibrous roots. He felt these likely as a type of dermatological growth. But he knew where they terminated and why there was no chance in expunging the creature inside of him, either through laxative, diuretic, or the utterance of Hail Mary's until Kingdom Come.

Best that the goddamn thing kill him before it escaped out into the world. Idly before applying a bit of hair gel, Mr. Sung mentioned to Harry that he thought that this might happen.

"You hold your breath as it begins to tear through your guts," he said to him. "Or bite down on something like your belt that you have folded in thirds. You can find a high-rise building to live in and when you feel it happening you can throw yourself out the window. Or maybe even before that with a shotgun in the mouth. If I were you," he told Harry, "I really wouldn't wait. The more you wait," Sung told him, "the harder it will get for you. I seen the movies about the host. It controls your brain the more you want to get rid of it. Soon you'll forget it's even there. You'll do what it tells you. And you won't even be all there. You'll ask how come this is but you won't know. And then it'll ask you to go kill somebody and you'll do it. 'Cause you won't know who's telling you to do it to. You'll think you only had a bad day."

As "the host" was in Cain's view illusory, he didn't have to worry about such a scenario at least in a literal rendering therein.

"Look, I got problems absolutely," he said to the barber surmising his situation for him. "But this doesn't by itself make me exceptional. It doesn't by itself make me some sort of candidate for suicide. Which is not to say I'm not a candidate for suicide," he said. "But this doesn't do it by itself. I mean, we all have crosses to bear, don't we? It doesn't mean I'm any worse off than you in the final accounting," Harry said. "You in this awful no-man's-land all your life. Whereas at least I'll be gone from here in a few days. And

then I can begin to forget about it. Or categorize it so that it's one more nightmare vision, empty of real significance. Simply because I dreamt it all to begin with. Or it was foisted upon me somehow."

So the logical strings were tied off. Cain reasoned that if the parasite inhabiting his form was entirely imaginary or at least metaphorical, its witness, Sung, must be imaginary or metaphorical in some way, too.

"What are you a metaphor of, I wonder," Harry Cain asked him while checking out his haircut in the mirror. Not bad, but not good either. Really, he hadn't cut much of Harry's hair at all. This by itself was not cause for remonstrance. He didn't think he had needed a haircut before walking in here. Merely he had needed somebody to talk to. Bones had been persona non-grata ever since crossing the Alabama state line. Fading in and out of reality just like Cain's hallucinations. As if he was lighter than air.

Aloud to Mr. Sung, Harry wondered what would happen should he manipulate a pair of his barber's half-rusted scissors like one would manipulate a dagger and attempt to plunge it through the center of his own right eye.

"Wouldn't hurt a bit, I'm guessing," he said to Sung, "or maybe it would. But this by itself wouldn't count as evidence for something. It would just be a conditioned response like a phantom limb. The mind fooling the body."

A better test, he thought, would be to plunge it through Mr. Sung's right eye and check for a reaction. He thought eventually every illusion revealed its true nature. He thought eventually the unreality of the situation would reveal itself through omission. There would be a noticeable lack of bleeding, for example, through the wound that he had created. He thought maybe even Sung would admit to him his true nature and the illusion would break at that point as there had been little in the way of the ability for it to deceive any longer.

Death Trip 64

Maybe within the illusion, whatever police force this imaginary municipality could muster would appear belatedly and handcuff Harry and throw him in the back of their squad car. All well and good, he felt, if that should happen. On the other hand, he felt simply being aware that one was dreaming was enough to rouse the dreamer from sleep. For him, the more significant task was to attempt to decipher exactly why these illusions persisted in their present form. He could have imagined anything, but he was imagining this specifically. Obviously, somebody was trying to tell him something. He was empty of ideas now about why a Korean barber was conjured in an otherwise empty street downtown in Hardsell, Alabama.

According to Bones, it had something to do with Harry's collective need for constant assurance from the bourgeois society he pretended to hate.

"Bub, it's obvious as the great outdoors," Bones said to him once he had rejoined him in the town's lone open bar in the afternoon. The fact that he was rife with need was no great revelation from Cain's point of view. The biggest problem Harry had with the interpretation was why now?

There must have been literally a hundred moments over the past twenty years that would have allowed Harry to go crazy in the self-referential way Bones was describing. Most significant was the time his band broke up while on tour in Brazil. His manager at the time had found him in a village longhouse on the Amazon's lip curled into a ball. Took too much ayahuasca or something advertised as ayahuasca. He had been vomiting for three straight days waiting for the clear light of reason to return. The only other alternative to sanity was insanity and Harry had been praying for this too. Anything but the nameless and indescribable state he was roiling within would have been better. He was aware of himself only through his physical pain. In this state, there was no desire whatsoever to go on.

The other problem with Bones' theory was that he was the one speaking of it. He who had never so much as been able to tell his dying mother that he loved her was no great sage regarding the hidden motives of his fellow men. He was empty inside basically, a type of robot whose attempts at conviviality seemed calculated to annoy merely. Harry Cain, he didn't know from Adam. He was engaging in psychoanalysis with him basically to start a fight. He was driven by boredom to such antipathy. He read contentment in the seeming complacency of others. He was disgusted by their contentment and resolved to do something about it forthwith.

His photos of Hardsell that he had been snapping throughout the day had been explicitly calculated to shock and offend not only *Filth* magazine's jaded readership but the equally dead-eyed Brooklyn staff.

"I used five rolls of film on a cripple rape," he said to Harry before describing the first-floor bedroom window he had peered through to call this into being. Obsessed by the task at hand, the rapist had not detected Bones' presence leaning over the house's flowerbox. Maybe he had but he was indifferent to detection at this point. He thought: if the good lord had not wanted rape to proceed apace, He wouldn't have gifted men with needy cocks and superior physical strength. Or something of that similar sort of generalization.

According to Bones, the man was certainly taking his own sweet time with the assignment. The casualness of his approach suggested that a routine had been established well in advance at this effort at documentation. And then there was the fact that the house's blinds were wide open. There was no reason for his cavalier attitude. He might well have been of the opinion that he was above the law.

The cripple was a double amputee above the knee, perhaps a diabetic whose treatment plan had gone to seed, or maybe a victim of an automobile collision wherein the engine

block had been forced backward into the passenger space right at seat level.

"The one thing you need to know about it," Bones said to Harry, "is she didn't much want anything to do with it. *Just lay still and try to enjoy it*, he told her. But no. She was upright on her stumps and trying to wiggle away. To him, this was an erotic display to judge only by his moaning," Bones said to Cain. "It made him only more resolved to do as he would with her and for a good long while."

Something about the amputee's crustacean-like shuffle that set him off in the carnal direction, Bones assumed by his own bug-eyed reaction to it. This was a previously unknown fetish. Also, the man's dick, though of normal size was split at the tip and shaded a type of bloody purple that suggested a type of pincer-like abuse during his youth either by clothespin or metal clamp. He seemed the sort of freak who would either do it to himself or have it done to him at his own request. He seemed proud of his dick's condition was the reason Bones could make such a claim. Its disfigurement seemed to its owner a badge of honor. He seemed to believe others would think so, too.

She, the victim, wasn't going far anyway, he told Harry, if'n she even wanted to.

"The goddamn room was like a fire sale after all the good items have been taken," he told Cain and sipped the Jack and Coke that Harry had bought him. Despite his obstreperousness, Bones wasn't that big of a drinker. He claimed alcohol had on him the exactly opposite effect it had on others. He claimed that it made him more alert rather than more euphorically sluggish. Who knew if this was true as contrariness was part of the Bones show. He liked to tell stories mostly designed to lead other men into further darkness. So much of what he spoke constituted airy metaphors devoid of a real-world referent. He didn't like to be a bore. He desired rather to be hated. As hatred nullified boredom completely, provided it was clearly directed.

Now, listen to what happened Harry when whoever it was had finally caught his prey on the dirtier side of the brass bed she had slipped off. He began as it were to imbibe.

"Bub, I'm not fucking with you," Bones said to Harry and mimicked the creature he believed to be a bird of paradise fluttering between their bodies as the coupling continued. Some sort of spontaneous creation like in the Aristotelian conception, Bones believed. If not, he would have detected the flighty thing well before because of his expert photographer's vision. Once he caught sight of the goddamned thing in fact it was all he cared to shoot from that point forward. The bird was a freak with the miniaturized head of Emmett Kelly Jr., the famous sad clown. He dedicated an entire roll to it with the intent of developing it first. So it was his belief that when the bird died the span of the universe would die with it. The spotlight would be swept up, you might say. He thought thus it a priority to see to its wellbeing all through his stay here. He was keen on the end coming soon. Hated other people more than he hated himself. He thought something like a special overlarge cage needed to be formed so that he could keep the bird well maintained and happy up until the point that it died of natural causes and the sun went dark for good.

Well, to hear Bones tell it, the sex was good for only one of the three, the rapist, the amputee, and the bird. But that was immaterial to his photographic essay. And when he finally got these pictures back, Cain could have a look for himself and see of what he was speaking.

"You stare at their faces from the side and get a real glimpse of the horror of what life is like down here in the Deep South," he told Cain and for the first time took a genuine swig from his drink. Might as well, Harry told him, as it was the last free one for the remainder of this trip. Harry knew an ingrate when saw one. He was cutting Bones off, therefore, for good. He knew somebody who was simply trying to get under his skin any way he could. He had been in

a band of junkies after all for seven years. He knew what it was like to fuck and be fucked with constantly for no good reason.

No need for such aggressiveness, he felt, especially at this late hour. Harry Cain, too, felt the world was dangling on some edge. He felt himself profoundly insecure down here. He felt at the point of attempting something horrible simply to forestall the notion that he had lost it for good.

He wondered if he could in fact go crazy on two separate occasions without first recovering his sanity in between. He supposed if he could, it was this secondary insanity that would prove even more excruciating than the first. Because the comfort of the dementia that the first layer of insanity brought would be revealed as temporary. Which would imply that every psychological state was rife with falsehood and misperception. There was no higher plane of being to flee to when one was alive. Only in non-being was the true reality of the universe made known to one. For a sojourner like Harry, there's no reason to stay alive any longer than was absolutely necessary.

So here he was (or felt himself to be), dangling on the precipice of this second plunge into darkness. And the thought that the punishment that he was being subjected to was far worse than he deserved. He had done a huge raft of drugs in his day and treated others shabbily. He was no angel certainly. But he didn't deserve this. He thought at the very least that a sort of explanation was owed to him. He thought God Himself was required to appear before him and explain the situation forthrightly. Maybe by that point Harry would be too far gone to even perceive him as God. This too would be a type of horrible irony and pre-ordained. God would wander around in front of Harry Cain and laugh. And then he would flee from whence He came with neither apology nor comment.

If Bones had a machete or some such hacking implement, he could help Harry reach his goal of ultimate craziness quicker perhaps than was even desired by the man himself.

"I'm sick of your bullshit," Bones said to him. "All your hangdog expressions and your sad sack ways. I'm sick of the way you seem to think all of this is all your fault, man. It doesn't make any sense to me either, but I don't pretend it's all an effect of my personality. I'm sick of the hollows in your cheeks of late. You think you're diseased, but it's skin deep like impetigo. You never recovered from your fall from grace in the nineties and now you're taking it out on the world. Not my fault, even a little. My advice for you is to look at yourself in the mirror and decide how much further down you want to go. There's nothing wrong with suicide, nothing dishonorable about it. You simply need to write your wishes for body-disposal out in advance. And try not to make a mess, knowing that whoever cleans up after you is making nine dollars an hour, max. Find an active volcano to throw yourself into, maybe. Or decide to live and quit pouting. The choice is yours completely."

There was about four ounces of Jack and Coke left in the drink Bones had been nursing. And as his glass was slowly upturned, the slightly effervescent pattern it formed reminded Cain of the spreading shape of a tracer pattern on the back of the eyes after having stared too long into the sun and the retinas of both eyes had suffered injury.

"I think the best we can do you and me," Bones told Harry. "is to get through the next three weeks with our egos intact. After that we can go our own ways. You don't have to thank me for all this unsolicited advice, buddy," Bones said. "You don't have to do anything for me really except do something about the way your teeth grind at night of late. It's getting to the point where I'm embarrassed to call you an acquaintance even. With you it's at a point you don't seem so tragic anymore. It's all something you need to take care of by yourself. I don't even for a moment think you're faking any of

it. I give you that much credit. I don't see you as the kind of guy who would try to cultivate sympathy for himself because he wants to gather admirers around him."

Bones told Harry Cain that what he had to do was to close his eyes and make believe, if only for a second, that he was a completely different person. By doing this he would be able to generate the requisite desire that would allow him to carry on for a little while longer. He would be able to imagine a happier, better self, standing in some mythical space. At which point there would be specific alternatives for him to consider. Most of these alternatives would be unreachable. But at least they could be considered by Cain imaginatively. He could dream of paradise even as it was denied to him. Which would be enough at least to carry him through his planned interview of Rance Muto.

A man like Rance was not to be denied or delayed. He was a potent force even as he was cooling his heels on death row for crimes so unspeakable even the usually sensationalistic media could only document them euphemistically.

"*Repeated violations to his nether regions,*" Bones quoted a favorite media euphemism concerning Rance's exploits. Then he ordered another drink. The black puddled edges of the old one were busy spilling over onto his bony lap at the same time, but fuck if he cared about that. For him it was the simple act of coveting where the value of drinking resided. Once a drink was in his possession, he felt it was his to do with as he pleased. He was legitimately naïve about the negative impression that he was creating. He had his views about his place that were unwavering. He didn't realize how offensive he actually was.

By the time he and Bones reached Rance Muto's habitat, Harry thought, he would be a completely new (*non compos mentis*) person anyway, so he wouldn't have to worry about decorum around him.

"Besides, "he said, "who gives a damn what that cocksucker has to say about either of us anyway? Is he somebody we have to look up to? Is he the inhabitant of some higher realm of being who gets to judge us all even as he himself has been judged by the State of Texas? He's condemned. And we are under no obligation to act like the opposite is the case. I don't appreciate that uppity bullshit," Harry Cain said. "I don't think people without power should act like they're the ones in charge and start dictating terms of behavior that people should adopt when you're around them."

Who's on the wrong side of the prison bars anyway, motherfuck?

So Cain had planned a response. It would be invoked if a bit of negative criticism was aimed in his direction by the convicted murderer. He would ask Rance how smart he truly thought he was, taking into consideration that he had been caught, convicted, and condemned by lesser intellectual lights altogether. Somebody like *Harry Cain*, by contrast, if he ever decided to indulge his baser instincts and kill somebody, would assuredly get away with it. He was smarter than an average psychopath, far more analytical and controlled in his responses and actions. His recent bout of madness did not dampen his self-esteem in this area hardly. Apart from a few rave reviews in *NME* concerning his lyrical prowess, Cain had no objective evidence concerning his own elevated status. But that hardly dissuaded him from his self-referential Christology. Perhaps it was part of his own mania that convinced him that he was a thing of light. Regardless, he didn't feel the need to supplicate himself to Rance when he finally laid eyes on him. He didn't understand Rance's appeal, nor his ability to control others through violence and the threat of violence strictly. He was indifferent to life but through it all he did not want to die. He thought many others thought the same way. He didn't understand the difference between a nihilist and a truly lost soul. Eventually life would

spell out the notion for him. But by then obviously the choice would not be his to make.

Unlike Bones, he had been drinking rigorously during the past several hours. And when the time came for him to throw a punch at his photographer's head, he would be off the mark by a considerable distance.

"The first chance's your last chance," Bones told him and stood up from the table. Eventually he would trail Harry outside to take a gander at where he was staggering off to. He lacked a paternal instinct completely. But a drunk's trajectory had always been one of his pet fascinations as if there was some sort of art invested in its procession. He assumed Harry was bound for the next open establishment in this already dusky town. Maybe he would just fall in the street's midst where he was walking. Maybe he would give Bones a genuine surprise and lead him to something entirely fascinating and unexpected in a place that seemed to war against both values utterly.

This indoor mall he had wandered into just off the town's main street was so small as to argue against what its purpose was in the community.

"Chocolate Factory's over there," a boy on a three-speed bike said to Harry when encountering him in the mall's lone vestibule. One way in and one way out of this emporium. Which as far as Harry knew swam against the basic design of the modern shopping center. This was to allow for maximum ingress and egress for would-be consumers.

The guy who had built this mall had been a local developer who had likely assigned his cousin as architect. Maybe he had authored the architecture himself as a cost-saving measure. It seemed like a structure more suited to a PX on a military base than a true commercial property. It had a provisional feel to it. Perhaps he would return here within a month and the building would be gone.

In addition to the Chocolate Factory, there was a cut rate clothing store and a closed Yankee Candle whose narrow

storefront had been defaced with multiple versions of the confederate flag.

To the boy Harry Cain said, "What do they do around here when they need a candle nowadays? When there is a need in your bathroom for a potpourri, to whom does the population of Hardsell, Alabama turn?"

Not answering the question specifically, rather the boy had taken to performing 180s with his bike using one of the building's walls as a launching pad for the endeavor.

"Never in my life until now," the boy told Cain, "have I so much as spoken the word *potpourri*. Let alone have one come into my possession. Something like that might well be illegal in the state of Alabama. Or will be once the average redneck is made aware of its existence. I do not believe something with that sort of appellation could sustain itself in this state once a basic awareness of its essence dawns on all responsible parties. Hard to answer how it ever managed to stay in business to begin with. But we took care of that certainly. And if you have some time, I don't mind sharing with you the details of the operation."

Noting Harry Cain's dress of retro black tie and jacket accompanied by skinny jeans, the boy made the point that everything he had just said likely registered with Harry Cain as pathological.

"We're not as dumb as y'all think we are down here," he said to Cain after successfully attempting a 270 with the bike via an extra-long run up in the vestibule. "Likely as crazy as you think, but not as dumb. You need to walk a mile in our shoes before you judge us," he said to him. "You need to think all about how it is out here in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do. And also this auspiciousness that takes control of you from the first day you're aware that there's something else out there."

He said this in a very relaxed manner that suggested he had thought about it deeply before saying it and there was no need to concentrate on his words' meanings for a second time.

"Go look at some of this town's neighborhoods and imagine yourself living there," he said to Harry and lent a hand to steady his drunken ass up. Despite having just met Harry, the boy seemed genuinely concerned for his well-being. He expressed the opinion that maybe he should go out for a little walk around the block before coming back in. He thought he was on the verge of passing out. Maybe too much to drink and something else. Harry seemed somebody who was in need of medical care at some point in addition to a little hair of the dog in the morning.

What Harry Cain said to this boy was that he had no intention of living either here or anywhere else on the earth for that matter. Furthermore, he had no desire to "walk a mile in another man's shoes." As he had no desire to walk another step in his own.

He was of the opinion that experience only confused a fragile mind and made the obvious choice impossibly complex because of it. The less one saw of the world, the more one understood it and recalled the obvious lesson that it was a part of your perceptions more so than you were a part of its corpus. Cain thought he could ascertain exactly how somebody lived by realizing that others were fundamentally unreal and that they were not, strictly speaking, alive. It was part of his dilemma about how to respond to mere ghosts. He thought the reasonable act would be to ignore everybody completely. But it was through others that one received the validation that one was ultimately alive in the first place.

If he denied another person's reality, Cain would also be forced to deny his own. In the sense that he like all people saw himself entirely through the eyes of others.

"I'm down here to write the collective story of the earth," he told the boy who looked to him on second glance disturbingly like a teenage version of himself. He had a bowl cut and a missing tooth up front likely from the misadventures on the bike but otherwise there was a definite likeness. This by itself suggested nothing to Harry about the

situation's authenticity. He thought he was hallucinating at most.

He didn't need the boy's advice certainly and assumed the easiest way to avoid it would be to push past him toward the dark corridor at the shabby mall's end. He wanted to see what lay beyond the lip of the shadow's entrance. He wasn't wholly convinced yet as to the building's stated purpose. He wanted to inspect the whole of the town, get a feel for everything before he left it. He wanted to look in every bit of it and see if there was something he had been underestimating about it.

Before he left the vestibule, Harry asked the boy what he thought of the sad fate of Rufus X up on the hill.

"Don't know nothing about it," the boy said. "What is it: *Rufus X*," he said. "He a superhero or something?"

Now, you have to realize that in this strange mall there was a certain amount of reverb that occurred simply because, at least to judge by initial appearances, they were the only two people present in the structure at the moment.

"I'm not hearing things, am I," Cain asked himself once he had entered the aforementioned shadow. He was listening for the report of his voice asking the same question. Well, since it had been said twice there must have been urgency behind the utterance. Like whoever said it believed it was true. (Harry personally didn't believe it was true, but he thought if he had heard it coming from a third party he might start to believe it slightly. Drunk as he was, he was deeply impressionable. He didn't think there was anything he believed firmly enough to not be talked out of by somebody with real insight.)

Well, look: he thought it was best that he should go forward on his belly crawling to some sanctum sanctorum in the manner that Solomon had approached the Unforgettable Fire in his temple's holiest room. Or better yet (in his accounting) in the manner of the legendary Iggy Pop, prone on broken glass in the Grande Ballroom in Detroit.

Death Trip 76

Harry always wanted to be Iggy not so deep down and was always accused of aping him on-stage. To him, it was more of a post-modern *homage* than actual aping. He felt the need to pay tribute to his betters, even as he was attempting to surpass them. Cain was a good rock singer who would never be a great one. He lacked the pipes and the commercial instinct to thrive. He realized belatedly that his career arc had executed a normal trajectory of the semi-talented. He was no legend despite a rabid fan base that claimed differently.

He was here, wasn't he, on his own death trip. He was doing it for cash only. Which was something Iggy Stooze, within the mists of legend that surrounded him, would never dream of doing in a million trillion years:

*You must sink, keep me sane/
Keep me, save me, everything*

In the center of the mall's shadow, stood a ROTC recruiting station that had been established in the advent of the Persian Gulf War to ride a patriotic wave.

"Observe a genius' touch," the lantern-jawed anonymous soldier said to Harry Cain from the widescreen TV set up in the storefront window. His M-1 was leveled at a spot just outside of camera range somewhere in the unvariegated sandy distance.

Just like Harry Cain, the soldier was on his belly peering over a slight impediment at the obscure object of his desire.

"Look at the shadow in the sand, not at the person who made it," the soldier spoke into the camera that was being held admirably steady considering they were under fire. He was speaking of his impeccable aim and the way that any active unfriendly became an inactive unfriendly once he had turned his attention to them. Blue-eyed and pious (one would have assumed by the way he lingered over specific words such as duty and country), he pointed to the notion of a world beyond the world. In his gaze ordinary objects were suffused

with invisible energy and were holy beyond words. He was telling the cameraman not to fret over the shifting nature of reality generally and moral reasoning specifically when contemplating existence in a theater of war. In the end, shadows were just as real as the objects that cast them. This is not faith so much as a common application of logic that led him to the conclusion. He assumed the existence of an immortal soul because merely he was able to contemplate the existence of one. And thus, he was free to do as he wished in this life completely.

An uncertain, niggardly soldier behind him had snuck up behind the True Soldier and stared into camera uncertainly as if waiting for a prompt to continue.

"We're here for freedom, for the love of country, for the ability to protect that which is ours and keep it ours forever," this True Solider said and seemed satisfied at the fidelity of his words. He had an American flag on a stick and he held the flag up as proof of his fidelity. Then he went cross-eyed and stared at the camera, unaffected by whatever action the USO person was directing him to perform. The film seemed on the verge of being ruined just then so it cut away.

Here in the enormous desert, a narrative let it be known that the search for weapons of mass destruction was ongoing. Just like the secret history of America, the truth of Saddam's WMD's would never be fully known. They could still be out there for all we knew. For all we knew they could be very much among us even now. They could be there crouching at the center of our experience like a prisoner on death row.

They would over time be annihilated. This according to the film's narrator was promised.

For the warrior spirit survived in this country despite all the hardship put in its way.

It's all quite likely, Harry Cain thought, and curled into a ball. Outside, his doppelganger on a bike had just put a flame to a gasoline-soaked rag in the parking lot. Eventually Harry would have to decide if he wanted to remain alive. His

Death Trip 78

warrior spirit was very much alive. He wanted to get to the bottom of this mystery just before it did him in completely.

Chapter Three: June 16, 2003

(Yazoo County, Mississippi)

Always through his long ordeal, his Dark Night of the Soul, Cain thought he had a right to the feeling of relief that only a satisfactorily answered question would provide. He thought he had been put through the ringer in life and was entitled to a bit of comfort towards the end. To Harry, this meant merely the extinction of not knowing about the end. He was unsentimental about what lay beyond life's impenetrable veil. He didn't believe in a heaven of tunics and harps.

He thought he had been a faithful servant of the Creator after a fashion. In his own way, he was full of praise for Him. He refused to live the life of bourgeois credulity, for example. He thought this was a worshipful act by itself. He had bought completely into the old bohemian saw about the spiritually purifying aspects of non-conformity. He was always convinced that weirdness was next to godliness. But he was always at a loss to explain why.

Talking to Dr. Michael Turnipseed of the *John Crowe Ransom State Correctional Facility* miles out of Jackson, Harry Cain struggled for words mightily on all subjects apart from his personal salvation.

"Look, no burns, or newly minted scars of any kind," he said to Michael Turnipseed, who of late had finished taking his pulse. Normal as far as he could tell, nevertheless, when

dealing with an obvious decadent such as Harry, Michael was not prepared to pass judgment on the accuracy of such metrics as an index of the man's interior state. More than any person the doc had ever met, Cain seemed thoroughly diseased. He had a twitchy way about him that suggested to Michael some undiagnosed neurological damage. He avoided making eye contact utterly, which suggested to Michael that he was harboring ugly secrets, if only physically. He couldn't say, furthermore, what had brought him to this part of the world. He couldn't say when he would be taking off and then where he would be going.

He had a twitchy left eye that acted up only at those times he was attempting to explain himself. To Dr. Turnipseed, this signified some sort of medullar damage. He had seen it before. These were the times when a man's body conflicted with his soul. He would never admit that this was the case but here was the proof. He could never admit that something had gone wrong within him and now he was in the midst of losing his mind in earnest.

"Turn your head and cough for me," Dr. Turnipseed said and wondered, as this request was being fulfilled, why there was only a muted sound emerging from his stethoscope pressed against his patient's chest.

Damned fool had placed the wrong end of the sensor against the patient's chest was the reason why!

Doc was out of his element here, treating a patient who had recourse to other forms of treatment apart from the sort offered in this infirmary.

The eighty-year-old Dr. Turnipseed had never been north of Memphis. He was a provincial's provincial, a rube's rube. He was objectively not very good at his job and was constantly attempting to distance himself from his patients, if only so they would not accuse him of quackery. He lived by the Golden Rule which to him meant several things depending on the time of day. At *this* time of day, it meant that men who could not do for themselves must respect those

who were doing it for them. This medical care was free and its quality, therefore, should not be criticized. If any of these gents could do better for themselves, Turnipseed thought, they immediately should do so and fly from his presence at once. Same with this self-described news reporter who looked like no news reporter he had ever met. Upon entering his infirmary, Michael had seen the holes in Harry's ear lobes that once housed ostentatious jewelry and suppressed the gag reflex. He saw the zig-zaggy way Harry shuffled in here to begin with and assumed he was on hallucinogenic drugs.

"I don't mind if you take some of my advice only some of the time," Dr. Turnipseed said to Harry, searching for his prescription pad. "But I'm partial to you taking a little bit of my advice at least a little of the time," he said. "I am not here in this facility engaging in the practice of merely maintaining facades. I'd like to think of myself as a trained medical professional," he said. "I'd like to think of myself as someone who truly takes seriously the Lord's dictum to treat others as you would treat yourself."

Religious was "Dr. Michael," as the inmates called him. He started every work day with a hearty prayer to his lord and savior on knees gone nobby with age and callouses accrued over the decades from the very same humble act. Ignorant of so much, he was necessarily in possession of a Manichean vision that seemed to dovetail nicely with his prison practice wherein so much darkness was observed on such a consistent basis that the notion of deviltry was utterly inescapable (at least by a benighted soul like him). Men with prolapsed rectums had come to visit Dr. Michael regularly, for example, resultant from the homosexual abuse they suffered. This was all the proof he required of a dark force moving invisibly. He thought it was self-evident and would brook no argument that it wasn't.

"Look, the superficial reality that you are appealing to by itself means nothing," Michael Turnipseed said to Cain and shone a light in his eyes to check for a dilatory reflex. His

enhanced diagnosis of the man had moved from ordinary neuropathy to brain damage due to massive ingestion of psychotropic substances. He was looking for spontaneous pupil dilation in the way he believed occurred regularly with LSD users. The pupils would grow bigger and smaller alternately independent of each other. He wanted to see it firsthand for himself. He wanted to have a tale to tell his wife Wynona when he came home at 6:00 PM on the nose as had been his routine for fifty-three years.

His point to Harry had been that Harry had needed to look beyond the superficiality of everyday events where it seemed nothing but a sense of empty longing awaited. He should rather focus on a deeper level wherein something resembling the clockwork of good and evil resided.

"You think you've been abandoned but that isn't so," Michael said and pointed to his left ring finger as a proof of concept for him. "The finger's a part of the hand. Follow, boy?" he told Harry and leaned in. "Just as you are a part of the world that you feel separated from completely, so is this finger part of the hand. A fire was set and you survived the fire nicely to hear you tell of it," Michael said. "But this shouldn't by itself convince you that you are apart from the whole. It doesn't make you a ghost just as it doesn't make me a ghost. Because I observe, you know. You got to begin thinking with both parts of your brain hemisphere instead of the right hemisphere alone," he said to Harry. "You reason and dream. You consider ably and forget your troubles just as easily," he said. "It's all part of the greater accounting in my consideration. You look to the Heavenly Father for an answer as to how your own worldview came to be thus. It is not a physician's job to even wonder. It is not the action of truly pious men to look at a daffodil and ask whether or not it is a daffodil."

According to Dr. Turnipseed, the simple soul was one who accepted all that is around him humbly. As if it is an eternal gift.

“Do not look a gift horse in the mouth,” was the prison doctor’s advice to Cain as he noticed a black object moving across the back of his right retina. As he lacked a proper medical explanation for it, he paid it no attention. It was no more than a waking figment to Dr. Michael. Just as to Harry Cain, the waking world was a figment. They could agree on very little except the need to turn away from the dark visions that life imposed on a sensitive soul. But Dr. Turnipseed had long ago mastered the act of turning away. He performed the act unconsciously now as a function of his growing senescence. He wouldn’t know what you were talking about if you pointed the behavior out to him. He should have retired decades ago. He should have had his license to practice medicine revoked.

Outside this tiny and surprisingly unsecured infirmary, various chalk-skinned men in identical pinstripe suits passed by at regular intervals as if carrion-circling crows looking for a safe moment to descend.

“All my days were spent in unsurpassed joy at play in the fields He hath made,” Dr. Turnipseed said to Harry and reached for a pair of rubber gloves. So much maintenance on the fundamentals of convicts had conditioned him to do this over the course of years.

In fact, all that Cain required was a bit of rehydration and an extended nap. At least in the short term. He had been drinking heavily ever since being pulled from the great mall fire in Hardsell, Alabama. Two weeks in, the trip was proving too much for him physically. The heat of a late spring had arrived in force knocking his hungover self out. And he was too distracted at the moment to have the sense to recuperate in his motel room.

This facility with its looming gun towers and six story security walls was proving particularly trying on Harry’s fragile constitution. Even from close-up, it appeared as something requiring a mote and drawbridge to complete its design. It was a medieval fortress whose fortifications had

been inverted to guard against its populous rather than an invading army beyond. It was a blight on the already blighted landscape of fallow Mississippi cotton fields, decaying sharecropper shacks, and unincorporated villages overrun by scavenging animals and the constant creep of a kudzu mass doubling as the obliterating hand of God.

The area's appalling heat was the last straw for Harry and drove him into the Turnipseed infirmary minutes after being afflicted with tunnel vision.

"If I was you," Dr. Turnipseed told him, "I'd consider further actions along the lines that drove you in here carefully before taking them." A la Colonel Sanders, the doctor had a white Van Dyke beard that gave him the opportunity for a delightful sensation while rubbing his chin. As he often did when some sort of perceived profundity escaped his lips, unbidden by his ignorant perspective.

He told Harry that he should get married. Then he prepared for him a syringe filled with a familiar potion of Vitamin B12 and Dextroamphetamine, the latter which was contra-indicated for dehydration. Merely it was a familiar concoction that Michael administered to the vast majority of his patients independent of their diagnosis. It was a shot of courage that would forestall a great deal of the whining or begging that usually accompanied patients' rerelease into the general population.

Mere victims of rape would never be allowed to linger in the infirmary more than forty-eight hours regardless of what damage was done to their bodies. They were injected with this cocktail and for a few hours they were alienated from their anxiety. Enough at least to not humiliate themselves with the pleading for protective custody.

"Physically here's a placebo," Dr. Turnipseed said to Cain and searched in vain for where he had misplaced the needle he intended to use. It had dropped into the B12 vial. And if only through process of elimination this should have been obvious to him. Dr. Turnipseed had over the course of

decades become dependent on some of the synthetic tranquilizers available in his pharmacy. And this, combined with him having entered his dotage, helped to scramble his brains superbly. He had never been a good physician, but presently he was a disgrace to his profession. If he had been in private practice, his license would have been pulled long ago. But the complaints of residents of a given maximum security prison were notoriously ineffective in the State of Mississippi. The state gave these felons merely three-square meals daily and a place to lay their heads and didn't expect guff in return. At the advent of the twenty-first century, the work gangs were returning to John Crowe Ransom. And about this phenomenon not even the ACLU could be bothered to protest much. They assumed it as a *fait accompli*.

In Harry Cain's case, Dr. Turnipseed's greatest medical asset had been the working sink in his consultation room.

"I drank my fill and felt a little better afterward," Cain said to one of the pale-faced men in the black suits, Wim Sigurdsson, to whom he had gotten to talking minutes after he had excused himself from the doctor's presence. He didn't want to be injected with anything particularly (which was unusual for him given his debauched history), but this was the way he felt just then. He was swimming in disorientation of late. He felt the gradual derangement of his senses to be right on schedule without the artificial boosting of its effects via Turnipseed's homemade goofballs.

The prison sink water had a metallic aftertaste but was otherwise satisfying. And at least to a degree it alleviated his headache and nausea.

"I think the best treatment for me would be a little hair of the dog," Harry told Wim and fought the urge to touch the white skin in front of him with an extended finger. There was a certain unreality to it that invited tactile sampling if only in the hesitant way of somebody in a dream. If he went ahead with it, he doubted it would be the first time that it happened to Wim. He would have thought Wim might well have been

apologetic to Harry about having tempted him in this way. He would have been told that the behavior was commonplace. Then Wim would have retrieved a handkerchief from his lapel pocket and dabbed at the red spot that his finger created. Very likely, the blood would pool around whatever object broached the skin's surface merely as an excuse to rise. He would have thought there might be a fair bit of pain as a result. This, too, Wim Sigurdsson would apologize for in that mongrelized European accent of his. He had no intention of laying a guilt trip of this magnitude on Harry.

On the other hand, he and his Caucasoid fellows might have been afflicted with some acute form of albinism native to the strange area that they had all emerged from.

"*The world floats on an ocean of whiskey*," Harry noted to Wim quoting one of his own lyrics. He checked in Wim's eyes for some form of recognition of its origin. Of course, he wasn't that desperate yet that he had to seek out affirmation in this most pathetic of ways. He was trolling the superficial reaches of Wim Sigurdsson's personality trying to ascertain what was recalled and what had never been known at all. He was under no illusion that the funereally dressed European was a fan of his. But that didn't mean he didn't know who Cain was.

Harry's second *Filth* article documenting the Alabama leg of the trip had, according to an email received at three am yesterday morning, been picked up in syndication.

"They want to re-publish in *Rolling Stone*," he told Wim in a matter-of-fact way that forestalled the conception that he was bragging on himself in any way. Indeed, he was uncertain of his journalism skills to the point that he had felt the need to stay up deep into every night revising his copy. He thought himself unworthy profoundly of the writers *Filth* kept comparing him to in their daily hyping of the series. He was no Hunter S. Thompson, surely. He had heard of Noman Mailer but never read a single word he wrote. He had never even heard of the third journalist, a certain Alexis de

Tocqueville. He didn't know shit about American history. He assumed the bad guys always won. This was as much as he had cribbed from social studies class.

Harry's "take" on the death penalty was to regard it as a monstrous overreach by the state justice system and condemn it implicitly. But in doing this he was hardly blazing a new path journalistically.

"It's a freak show basically down here," Harry said. "And they want me to capture it and frame it up with a lot of sociology," he said to Wim capturing his own feeling about the project in surprisingly concise terms. Also, he didn't think deep down the average *Filth* reader gave two shits about the fates of the mostly dark-skinned condemned on Death Row. Rather, they were into the gothic horror of the mechanics surrounding death penalty implementation. They saw it as a type of *Pit and the Pendulum* excitement scenario wherein the sight of the progressively lowering blade (which was death penalty implementation) proved too fascinating to turn away from based on the violence it promised. They felt it was a sick game that they were at enough of a distance from to draw pleasure in watching. They were voyeurs of a despicable stripe. They tolerated the journalist's moralizing about this subject more than enjoyed it. They wanted intimate descriptions of the sound burning flesh made as it curled off hot bone. He thought in the next article he would dispense with all sociology entirely and simply describe what he saw. If only to see what the reaction would be. He assumed at this point anything he wrote would be accepted for publication. There was a plan to feature Bones' photographs over half the spread regardless by Article Four. *Filth's* editor-in-chief, Mr. Mud Holmes, could never be accused of coddling writers. He was bucking to leverage the free magazine's hip reputation into a weekly TV program within which very few if any writers would be employed.

The *Rolling Stone* reprint would run in tandem with a *Whatever-Happened-To* inset featuring Harry. An hour ago, the

magazine had emailed him a questionnaire that he was contractually obliged it seemed to fill out. The first question on the sheet was, "How different did the world look to you the minute you were sober?" The last question was some garbled nonsense about his favorite sex position in tandem with the inquiry about whether he would save George W. Bush from drowning if no one else had been there to observe his actions.

"The more insight you gain into the inner workings of The Fourth Estate," Harry told Wim. "The more acceptable a fascist dictatorship starts to seem."

He meant this quite sincerely. He included himself amongst the number of traitorous ink-stained wretches who would be, upon the New Order's instantiation, herded into a football stadium to be executed summarily for crimes against the People and propagandizing on the behalf of the oligarchs.

"We don't amount to much, any of us," Harry told Wim. "That is to say, much ethically. Or even in terms of literary ability," he said to Wim concerning what V.S. Naipaul once termed The Vermin Class. He was indicting the whole profession even as he was only thinking of himself specifically. He didn't understand how any of these goddamned purveyors of truth could get on their high horse and ignore their own compromised reportage constantly. He always believed that he who was without sin should cast the first stone. He didn't understand how these minions of multi-nationals could at an instant conceive of themselves as the First Amendment's solemn protector and paper over their own robust efforts to contribute to censorship by way of mass inanity. The average jerk on the street nowadays couldn't be counted on to form a cogent political opinion let alone voice it in an understandable way. The mass media had descended and scrambled his brains completely. Ignorance was the *real* censorship of the age. And now the establishment wanted him to die so that their infantilizing of *vox populi* could proceed unbidden by any law or moral qualm.

Not that he had taken the assignment with much intention of making any serious contribution to American citizens' understanding of capital punishment, but already before Article Three was penned he found himself straining against the boundaries of his own talent.

"I'm not the man for the job," he told Wim, speaking as honestly as he was able to, given the public circumstances that they he was in. So many of Wim's identically dressed compatriots were moving up and down the prison's surprisingly large hallway staring at him as he went. To Harry they seemed a type of strange drama troupe. Maybe they were down here in Yazoo County to make a statement of their own about public execution. They all seemed to have busied themselves at specific tasks. But as a group they were too well dressed and too focused to be taken for journalists.

If somebody were to ask Harry who he thought was the man for the job, he might well have answered, "Jesus Christ" and smiled. Actually, he thought saving the populous of Mississippi from their own worst instincts to be a fool's errand. Couldn't be done likely, short of the intercession of the Supreme Court and the deploying of the National Guard. He assumed the overwhelming number of Mississippians had made up their minds about the death penalty long ago. Over time, they would be forced to live with the consequences of their decision. Maybe in another life they would be the ones being strapped into a wooden chair prefatory to their murder. He thought a more likely scenario was that the world over time would become disgusted with the South's grotesqueries and boycott the region. A demonstrable cause and effect analysis would need to be pointed out to these goobers. Eventually they would get the message and adopt a more civilized form of jurisprudence. But this could take centuries.

A rube like Dr. Michael Turnipseed, for example, would likely go to his grave and even past it denying the heinousness of the system within which he had labored for decades. He was probably exceptionable in this regard only in his ability to

articulate why the death penalty was so good for the body politic. He thought it should be promulgated unceasingly in every state despite the evidence to the contrary that it did society not a lick of good. He was a capital punishment evangelist. He didn't give a damn what the evidence of his eyes told him.

"He tried to jab me with something, inject something unpleasant into my arm," Harry said to Wim about his encounter with Dr. Turnipseed and cast his eyes back to the infirmary entrance from where he had just emerged. So it was Harry's contention that Wim and his film crew (well, if that's what they were) should interview Dr. Turnipseed to get a better sense of the general perversity of the administrators of justice in this neck of the woods. Maybe not a full one on one was required, but he thought at the very least it would be good to gain background on how the present crisis had come into being.

Dr. Turnipseed, despite his vile outlook and his poor professional conduct, likely had a great deal of knowledge concerning this prison's workings. Furthermore, it was his job to pronounce the time of death of all executionees. He probably had an enormous number of stories to draw from. He could likely tell you exactly what it took to kill a man and what was the most efficient way of doing so. Hard to say if this had been the thrust of Wim's documentary, but Cain was attempting to be helpful here. Tyro that he was, Harry felt an ever so slight journalistic responsibility to be collegial to another reporter. Wim hadn't reached out for help in any way, but he felt if only fleetingly the need to be of help to him. He assumed they were all here for the same reason. These Europeans, eliding their own savage history momentarily, wanted to gawk at immoral Americans. Their audiences of the jaded and merely superficial wanted to gawk as well. They felt the South owed it to them after all the trouble they caused the Negro race. They felt honestly it was the least they

could do for them as a way of evening the score for all humanity.

Harry could if Wim so desired corner Dr. Turnipseed, who was frail beyond his years, in his infirmary. He would detain him until he provided the unadulterated truth about life on the inside.

"He's a company man through and through," Harry told Wim of Michael, noting the doctor's use of "we" constantly when referring to the daily operations of John Crowe Ransom. According to Dr. Turnipseed, there was no special preparations made at the advent of a man's execution for either the condemned, his next of kin, or the executioners. Well, the executioners, the marksmen on the next go around, would put in for double-time pay for the ninety minutes they were engaged. But this was only fair, you'd have to say, given the contribution they were making to the outcome. The marksmen were expert shots to a man. Most of them had learned the skill while serving in the military.

According to Dr. Michael, these marksmen were the greatest people on the face of the earth.

"Called 'em his boys," Harry said to Wim, "and pretended to shed a tear at the thought of one of 'em having to be let go due to budget cuts."

The doctor would gladly donate a kidney to any of 'em or even to one of their kin if requested, he told Cain. He said it just as his stethoscope was being mishandled. Dr. Turnipseed had never seen so much as a bead of sweat form on any marksman's temples when aiming their rifles at the paper bullseye pinned on the condemned's left breast. To them, it was all in a day's work. To admit anything else would be a sort of betrayal. They would at that point have to admit the humanity of the executionee. And this was an act that would cause capital punishment's entire political structure to collapse on its own.

This day was special for the condemned, if only because thirteen hours before the sentence was to be rendered he was

able to request a final meal. This feast would be slid into his cell in the usual manner, through the crack below the cell door, actuated by means of an old broom handle.

"I had a special section planned for this scene in my article," Harry said to Wim pausing to describe the broom handle itself which had a rubber stopper at its end to prevent it from being used as a weapon if the condemned, realizing he had nothing to lose, grabbed it from the guard. The reason for his interest was that he thought it strange that the feeding of another human being would take the nearly identical parameters as the feeding of a lion at the zoo. Nobody else in the facility thought it slightly unusual, however, or was prepared to talk about it. But it was part of the journalist's mission to appraise a situation with objectivity. So many people had simply absorbed the strangeness that was presented to them and carried on. They couldn't see that which was right before them. They couldn't begin to disabuse themselves of the blinders an ideological perspective supplied.

Again, Wim Sigurdsson could either accept or reject Harry's notions. Harry was feeding him ideas if only to be convivial. He couldn't tell and didn't know if this was proper etiquette. Could have been that he was in the midst of committing a great faux pas. If this was the case, Wim Sigurdsson surely would correct him at some point. He assumed he was owed that much by a fellow investigator. He thought he and Wim belonged to a similar caste. He thought merely he was owed the common courtesy of being told to knock it off.

Surmising him with a face that might as well have been a mask for all the emotiveness it displayed, Wim Sigurdsson prepared to speak.

"If I saw you on the street or in a half-crowded café," he said to Harry, "I wonder if you would broadcast as many excitations about your immediate surroundings as you are broadcasting now."

Speaking in a flat tone devoid of either bemusement or rebuke, Wim seemed to be addressing a third, hidden observer. He had no intention of instructing Harry on the proper etiquette this moment called for. On this matter, like so many others, he simply thought it was beside the point. He simply thought the crucial moment was in the midst of rotting away, unused for the purpose it was best suited for.

He wanted to have a conversation with Harry. He wanted it to be more about the affairs of gods than the affairs of men.

You see, like Harry Cain, Wim Sigurdsson had suddenly realized that he was fundamentally unreal. For hours on end, he had stared at his pale white hands rising and falling in front of his face like jellyfish on gentle tides. He recalled that he was a mere vision of some unobserved, pre-conscious visionary. Therefore, existence was his to do with what he wanted. He had conceived of Harry. And here Harry had come, washed up into existence as a dead sea monster upon a nameless coast.

Which was not to say he was Harry's master. Merely that Harry was provisional as a half-observed thought. He assumed Harry knew this already at some level. He assumed the empty game of workplace protocol at some point would prove tiresome enough for him to be dropped from the conversation for good.

Wim was here in Mississippi now merely as a host for some dominant, more evolved creature already stirring inside him. Thus, he thought it was his last chance to get things right. Eventually a corner would be turned, and he would be the parasite. He would be unworthy of the quest at that point. He thought at that point God would abandon him and all his demands would go unanswered for good. As empty men were busy men and must always be.

They realized themselves as transient images projected on a wall and recoiled in horror at their depreciated ontology. They felt themselves dedicated to liberating so many others

from their delusions. They wanted to give comfort to the oppressed. They wanted to empty the lives of others as their lives had been emptied, perhaps by mere circumstance. They saw themselves as saintly because of the endeavor. They saw themselves as closer to Gods than men if only because like Gods they were absolute fictions.

Now, the reason Wim was here and the reason Harry was here (and according to him one could not exist in the present moment without the other) was to roll back the false layer of consciousness on the world as if a falling of scales from eyes.

"You wouldn't know it to look at me," Wim Sigurdsson said, "but I am your savior. My origins are not celestial in nature but come from the crinkled manifolds of your mind. I am not here to serve myself but show you the way forward," he said. "And by this, I mean the way to your ultimate destruction. You have ceased to matter in anybody's conception. Your own consciousness is holding you back and you must be liberated from it. In death you will find the certainty you crave. You have reached the end of a certain way of being. And now you must enter into non-being forever."

The makeup on Wim Sigurdsson's face was only visible from close-up and then appeared as a thin layer of dead skin unnaturally bloodless and demanding of immediate excising if only because of the itchiness and disorder it suggested.

He was telling Harry Cain that facts expressed on a journalistic level had nothing to do with any sort of truth. If you wanted to find out the truth of a given situation, you needed to ignore facts utterly. You needed to become more instinctive and animal-like, in the manner of so many residents of maximum security facilities. Wim told Harry that likely this was why he was here to begin with. He told him this was what his immediate surroundings had to teach him even as he was being pushed into the abyss rapidly.

"Take these wretches as your teachers rather than your tormentors," Wim said, waving one exposed arm at the metal

doors that surrounded them. Each door opened to a prison wing that housed what Wim claimed amounted to a collective wisdom of the age.

Well, this was both preposterous and true. Harry couldn't believe any path of wisdom led to the door that opened to an execution chamber. He couldn't believe that just before a prisoner's death there came the utterance of reminiscences whose effect was to edify as they confused.

He believed God cruel but not perverse. He didn't believe that anything but death resided behind all the dead eyes that confronted him minutes ago when he was staggering towards the infirmary. There were select inmates that gave the impression of wanting to hurt Harry Cain badly. He couldn't imagine that somehow he was worthy of being hurt.

Wim Sigurdsson said that very soon Harry Cain would embark on a journey which would confirm everything he had to say.

"Eventually it will become self-evident," Wim told him, perhaps intending the subject of his sentence as the provisional nature of the world. If this was the case, then everything he had just told him could be ignored. It would all soon be self-evident to Harry, anyway. And he could sleepwalk his way through the world easefully until that point arrived.

When you've gone truly crazy, Harry realized, there's no use reaching out to any segment of the world. Because invariably it would become a self-aggrandizing act. The only real moral recourse for a schizophrenic was to suffer quietly. There was no escape from the funhouse of the mind. Nor was there any real impetus to try. At best, it was possible to refrain from hurting others. He thought it was a moderate recompense, the knowledge that even now he was striving towards the good.

Of course, there was the possibility that Wim Sigurdsson was as real as the jaybird that flirted outside he and Bones' rental car windshield in the parking lot on the way in here.

"I took my arm and held it out the window for it," Harry said to Wim. "I was waiting for the moment it came to rest on my arm. I was waiting for it to do what my imagination demanded of it."

Perhaps merely Sigurdsson was an eczema-plagued joker who had conspired with his photographer on the way in here to fuck with Harry's mind. And, therefore, the insanity whose grip Cain felt so profoundly was illusory too. Or maybe it was real but utterly exaggerated. He wasn't crazy so much as paranoid. Or maybe there were too many drugs in his system to be able to decide between the two.

Speaking such truths to the spindly psychotic before him, so it seemed Harry Cain had inadvertently made a new friend.

"*Fine,*" this man, the condemned, a mixed-race Cherokee from a patch of swamped oblivion said to Harry introducing himself by his last name only. He extended his hand between paint-less iron bars. He had a first name which was Roger but as an act of minor defiance unto his tormentors only answered to his last name. Routinely strangers would ask after his identity and he would tell them, "Fine. I am Fine." He would say this to them and cross his legs on his bunk. Oh, it was a juvenile act, but this was all he had in these late days. As ever, in such a region a request for a late stay of execution had been denied. Daily the screws were trolling the halls of this facility staring at him as they moved past him. They were trolling for a sign of weakness. Or at least a sign of anxiety. But whenever he saw them, he would always sit up on his bunk and say his usual: "I'm Fine!"

Boy wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, let's face it. To the screws, such exclamations were a confirmation of his borderline retardation though they kept their mouths shut about it. The ghost of Joe Arridy could not even walk through walls as thick as these. They didn't want to be deposed about it later at an eleventh hour proceeding. It's the last thing in the world they wanted was to have Fine live past his expiration date.

They saw Fine as an objectively evil person and, if only to judge by the dry recitation of his crimes, that most certainly was true.

"A liquor store hold-up," Harry said to him, recalling the event if only to prove he had performed his research per his duty. It wasn't the hold-up, however, but the execution-style murder of the store's Latvian proprietor and his five months pregnant daughter that led to his sentence of death by firing squad. The sentence was actually for only two murders, though the presiding judge had claimed three. And this was grounds for yet another fruitless series of appeals from a Yankee lawyer down from Chicago. Prejudicial, he claimed, such an opinion. But prejudicial only in the light of his own liberal belief system which held the life of the unborn as having the same ethical status as a carbuncle. Those in the court when the judge read his decision were admiringly still. They thought a great man of bearing was before them at last holding forth. They were convinced of the rightness of his legal thought and would have had stern words for all those that thought differently.

The arresting officer had asked Fine repeatedly during his booking how come. And Fine had no answer for him.

"Some things you can't make heads or tails out of," he said simply when it came time to cop. Well, of course, he knew how come, deep down. Fine was playing stupid on purpose if only to infuriate. Ignorant of Harry's inner turmoil, he saw him as one more screw. He had honed his act by this point to a sharp edge. He knew what to say to make white folks unhappy. He knew all about their weaknesses and prejudices even before they spoke a word of it to him.

Cain was in fact one of the few people white or black who couldn't actually be coaxed into wondering how come.

"I know how it goes," he told Fine and recalled for him the incident of crushing the upper thorax of a millipede that sought refuge in the forest of his damp chest hair during an extended cold turkey. Lying on a soaked-through mattress in

somebody's attic, Cain's nerves had been rubbed raw enough to wonder why he hadn't felt much remorse for the action. He thought he needed to feel remorse for the vanquished creature but couldn't summon the requisite energy to do so. He had crushed its center with a thumb and wiped the dark protein paste off his heaving body with the back of his hand. He felt nothing more than the fleeting imperative to feel something. Soon even that was all over with. He was through the membrane of vulnerability and emotionally clean. Soon even the recurrent dreams of millipedes crawling through his sinuses were halted. Except for the fleeting visions documenting his own form converted to a protein paste, he was back to normal. He understood perfectly why murderers murdered. With such knowledge, he couldn't be called upon later to show sympathy.

Fine was the exact creature God had intended him to be, awash in a bottomless ocean of mirrors. With this in mind, he was largely blameless concerning the violent acts he had already committed and those he would continue to commit if given the chance to do so. He shouldn't even have been incarcerated much less executed for the liquor store double murder. Maybe at most he would be forced to perform a little community service or attend a session in anger management. Held in this light, he was as much a victim as his victims or even more so. He was a victim of state-sanctioned violence as opposed to ordinary run-of-the-mill violence. He was being held up as a monster whereas his victims were being held up as angelic innocents unto which a great injustice had been committed.

In his matter-of-fact way, all this was being articulated by Fine unto Harry Cain. Cain would write it up later for the delectation of the average *Filth* reader. He was honest about his many compulsions and his seeming inability to ingratiate himself with the rest of society. He hadn't been on drugs at the time of the murders, merely low on cash. The liquor store in question dealt in cash only. He killed the proprietors

because he didn't want to leave witnesses behind him. He had read a detective novel once that counseled that this was a good idea. You throw away the gun and you don't leave witnesses behind. According to the novel, this was how it was done. No witnesses. Nothing there for the cops to latch onto later. They'd have a mystery on their hands merely. They'd give up on the case supposedly within a week and that'd be it for a lifetime.

Indeed, the reason they caught Fine at all was that he hadn't gotten rid of the gun before the next robbery.

"It had a nice feel to it. Kind of a nice settling action to it when you pointed it at somebody," Fine said to Harry. "Like it wanted to kill whoever it was in front of it and was giving me every opportunity to do so. It was like a friend who wanted to work with me," Fine said. "And I appreciated that. There was no way I could have gotten rid of it after I killed with it," he said. "It was like taking a virgin bride then divorcing her after the wedding night. It's not the right thing to do. Just wasn't," he said. "It was not something you would think about doing if you were in my shoes."

According to Fine, he slept with the gun underneath his pillow and this was where it had been recovered after he had been arrested for common assault and a search warrant issued when a jailbird acquaintance had ratted him out in exchange for a reduced sentence on a charge of statutory rape.

Now, here Fine was contemplating being shot with other men's guns as if there was some poetic justice intended.

"They told me it was just a matter of rotating the method of execution," Fine said, after claiming that of all the ways possible this was the preferred way to go. If only because he said this was the method of execution of prisoners of war.

It was a manly way of dying, empty of the thrashing and pleading that would be attached to (so he assumed) death by poison gas pellet. The bullseye on his chest would be pinned directly above the heart and the marksmen supposedly were all crack shots. You mouthed off some while you were still

Death Trip 100

alive and they would shoot you in the shoulders and through the knees and have to reload. This was the threat that had been constantly leveled against Fine when he had contemplated throwing a cup of urine in a particular screw's face. They told Fine that he didn't know what it was to suffer until he'd been gut shot. They told him he'd sit there in the chair he'd been strapped into and bleed out for hours.

He'd black out obviously, but they had an amphetamine drip at the ready to keep him awake. This too was part of the official protocol concerning the death penalty in the state of Mississippi. They had done a lot of research on how it should be done. There was a moral element of it which was to make the condemned terrified as the instant of death approached. Whereas, if they had been asleep merely, they would have just woken up dead, so to speak. No fun in that hardly. No Levitical Terror, no God-Fear to be instilled into them most of all. The witnesses and public-at-large knew what their fate was if they should become as self-absorbed as Fine was and start holding up liquor stores with a gun for a lover.

The truth about Fine was he was as inured to death as he was inured to life. He assumed that whatever physical pain the State would inflict on him in the journey from life to death was utterly transitory and not to be dwelt upon. Just like a rotten tooth that needed to be pulled, after a fashion. It wasn't that Fine was such a badass. It was just that something essential had died in him long ago that he had stopped caring about so many things. The great adventure of life was completely over for him. If he had been free and on his own recognizance, he likely would have felt the same. Life didn't do it for him so much. He was happy in a way because it would soon be over. He lived now basically to torment the screws. And as he could only die once, he supposed he would torment them by his absence. It would be hollow for them he honestly believed when he was gone. He would be flown from this veil of tears and they would be right here suffering in search of a new object to focus their contempt upon. He

had divined months ago that death was a gift given only to the worthy. He assumed he would be in rarefied company once the lights went out for good.

"You understand me better even than them shrinks do," Fine said to Harry Cain as he watched him scribble on his reporter's notebook. No notes at all there, as Fine could clearly see. Rather there was a sketch of a boy fallen off of a swing set and having had his skull impaled on a sharp rock below as a result. He was staring down at the paper of course. Like Harry, he was searching out the exact moment of death. As if some profound moment had routinely passed unseen in this representational setting yet while still in plain sight. He wasn't obsessive about it yet like that undertaker in Alabama he had heard of but didn't write about assuming that here was a bit of arcana that literal-minded hipster kids couldn't countenance a little. No, all the trillions of bits absorbed since their birth made these kids unable to hold two opposing thoughts for a second. They were cynical as all get out, but they needed it all explained to them. Somehow only Harry Cain found this weird. He didn't understand the root of their cynicism. He didn't understand why people who had experienced so little of the world nevertheless thought the world a crock.

According to Fine, the reason for this had everything to do with the spare the rod spoil the child parenting philosophy that he had been subjected to growing up.

"Violence grounds you," Fine told Harry. "It lays you low and destroys your pride. It makes you see that you're a part of things. A part of bad things. You get your ass whipped good and for a while you don't know who you are. You're humiliated by it," he said. "And that's not a bad thing. Because you've got boundaries placed on you suddenly. And you're not thinking you're apart from everything like you are some alien lord from another planet here to judge everything instead of just another earthy animal looking for something to eat. You're human because you're so limited. It makes you

happy just to be alive to know how weak you actually are. And how so many people can come around and end it for you in a second."

If Fine hadn't had his hide tanned routinely while growing up, he claimed he would have been the lesser for it. He believed this with a fierce conviction and under most circumstances would not be bashful about proclaiming it unto the faceless masses. But suddenly he remembered where he was and who he was and what fate awaited him in a couple of days. This had made him uncharacteristically sullen concerning the subject of corporeal punishment. He thought it was inappropriate to express if no less true.

"Maybe take it easy on yourself if only because it needs to be this way," Fine said to Cain merely. As opposed to the usual dissertation on whippings and so forth. He moved his thumb over the many white patches of his skin that his vitiligo created. He was by degrees getting whiter every day. Pigment cells were falling away just like meaningful moments. A dinosaur of regret stirred almost imperceptibly beneath the Loch Ness of Fine's soul. Cain was a good enough person to expunge that from his memory completely. He had no intention of showing Fine at his worst. Besides, his readers would not forgive him if he had.

Harry wouldn't be back here to bid Fine adieu as the gruesome nature of a death by firing squad eliminated the possibility for a public viewing of the execution in the estimation of the state. Chances were regardless even if he had been present no sort of weepy public sendoff would be enabled. As Fine was one of those rare people incapable of self-pity.

"Any last words planned," Harry asked Fine without bothering to check whether the Mississippi penal code allowed the granting of final words to occur in an official capacity. Despite the ritualized nature of the way they approached their duties as executioners, they might well have simply let the condemned rant and rave in an *ex-officio* manner

while the marksmen took aim. As this method of execution relied on other men's steady hands, they would have a valid excuse for ignoring him or even gagging him. Very likely many of the "last words" merely would have amounted to so much invective or bleats of self-pity aimed in the direction of various prison officials. He thought it wise from this perspective that the condemned should be shut up. They were killing the son-of-a-bitch. There was no need to proceed with any semblance of respectful decorum. It was at least a tacit admission that on this day what they were doing should not be looked upon respectfully even though their rhetoric said otherwise.

Indeed, Fine's rehearsed speech entailed claiming in as solemn a voice as he could muster that he had been wronged utterly. And would therefore, once in spectral form, be able to haunt those men who had driven him to the grave prematurely.

"They all got the God-fear in them awful, these peckerwoods," Fine noted to Harry and for the first time since being in his presence smiled. Oh, it would be a blast to rematerialize at some point and watch the stricken looks on some of the marksmen's faces, say, when a noise was heard through their front door devoid of human origin. He truly believed haunting was possible, if only from the experience of himself having been haunted by his presently dead drug addict mother who had taken it as sport to burn Fine with the tips of her lit cigarettes when he was least prepared to defend himself against it. The mind was the dwelling place for ghosts. And as the mind observed the universe and gave it shape and coherence, the universe contained the mind's observations as well. So, in the end, in his view, there was no reason to distinguish between the universe and the mind. As one was held within the other like two opposite hands held in an embrace. Fine thought it sophistic to claim that one entity was entirely separate from the other as so many of his science teachers had. They had apparently never been haunted to any

great degree. Once one has been haunted, the phenomenon was really self-evident. Fine didn't think it really took any thought to see that. He didn't believe himself exceptional in any way. To stare at one's hand, for example, and see it change into something altogether different before you took little initiative. It was not *literally* changing. But then again it surely was. As you could never wholly disbelieve the evidence of your own eyes. All any of us had to go by was perspective. You could never say with finality that what appeared to be there was not there. And vice-versa (though so many ultimately tried to do so).

As for Harry, Fine would refrain from haunting him in exchange for the kindly act of slipping him the package of cigarettes visible in his shirt's front pocket.

"They don't let us keep fire-making tools in here no more," Fine said to Cain and winked. "Not without strict supervision," he said. "Not without somebody lighting them for you basically while you stick your head through the bars with the cigarette in it."

Well, why not anyway, Fine said.

There was nothing Cain had to lose certainly. As he had not been briefed on the procedure in advance. Weird as it was, they had neither searched him for contraband on the way in nor provided an orientation about how to behave. Down here in this castle of a penitentiary, the men in charge simply didn't care. They gave visitors the freedom to roam utterly. They didn't supervise them in any demonstrable way. Why, even the guard shack at the other end of death row had been abandoned. They simply assumed Cain knew what he was doing. Or maybe they were itching for a riot in order to lay down the law properly on these scum in the same Old Testament manner that their dreams advised them to do constantly when a little cherry brandy was drunk before bed.

You take you drawing, Fine said to him, and you work on your drawing to the point you think it is finished. Then afterwards you can take your drawing and give it to an ink

artist to create a back tattoo for yourself. It would be something that Harry would be proud of for the rest of his days. It would likely be the only object that Fine would be willing to remain alive for to be able to inspect.

Not that he had a choice, but he would prefer to have remained alive. He had bonded with Cain over their shared disgust with life. He thought that Harry was a funny guy and he wished merely he would cheer up a bit and not act so put upon by the world just because, objectively speaking, he happened to be teetering on the lip of hell.

Harry would in Fine's estimation live a long and pointless life. Regardless of his being disabused of all myths in advance, he would survive in a type of purgatory until myth could be spontaneously generated as a replacement. He couldn't be Cain any longer. He couldn't be the lie and the lie's antidote simultaneously.

Thus, a transmogrification was in order. Cain needed to be one thing only. Or maybe nothing unto itself, rather than two things in opposition to each other. He needed to let it happen (if he ever had the choice). It was too painful to be two things at once always. He needed to prosper under wavelength collapse. He needed to enjoy himself and the moral certainty this new perspective brought him. Living in the manner of a particle of light was overbearing for a human. It rendered ordinary perception useless. It turned common observation into paradoxes. It made it seem that every statement made was a partial lie.

"It don't matter what you know, it's what you do," Fine said to Harry Cain, surmising the situation for him from a slightly different angle. Strange that a real bit of philosophy had been allowed to crawl out of his ass then up his splotchy white arm to make a grab for Harry's notebook. As if in recompense from this bit of highfalutin verbiage, he had caught himself adopting traits that he despised. He needed to revert to a base state seemingly. Even on death row, Fine's insecurities were getting the better of him. He still felt the

need to keep up appearances even to one as non-judgmental as Harry Cain.

When passing by the nearest screw who happened to be lounging just outside his protected station, Cain started a conversation. He wanted to know the exact nature of the ruckus that had taken place minutes before in front of Fine's cell.

"I heard it from far off like a thunderclap," the screw said to Harry and didn't bother to remove himself from his position leaning against a concrete wall. A union man absolutely, you see. And even if he wasn't, Harry Cain didn't seem the sort to whom an air of reserved formality needed to be presented to proceed civilly. A man liked to lean against a given wall because it was easier than standing straight up all day and that was all there was to it. If an alarm sounded, he figured there was plenty of time to swing into action after the fact. More than this, he lacked a sense of professional pride that would allow him to balance his weight evenly on two feet with his shirt tucked in and his baton placed (per SOP) in his right belt loop rather than on the concrete floor next to his angled frame, rolling into a raised boot heel every so often, driven that way by a prevailing breeze.

The guard thought that splotchy old Fine might be messing with Harry, but he was in no position to go ahead and bust it up, solitarily positioned as he was and lacking proper riot gear (and most importantly the permission of the deputy warden to go ahead and do so, ever since a consent decree with the Justice Department had been signed by the Mississippi Department of Corrections).

Desperate circumstances were the fool's reward for poor planning. Far be it from the screw to try and insert himself in between a man and his just desserts.

"You don't look the worse for wear anyway," the screw said and shifted the toothpick in his mouth from the right side to the left side and back again. He noted the scratches on the back of Harry's wrists that likely wouldn't need tending to.

The glaze over Harry's eyes was there long before his one-on-one with the condemned. This was an affect from some sort of desperate circumstance of which the Mississippi Department of Corrections was likely entirely innocent. Can't blame a city slicker's louche ways on the recklessness of correctional officers of John Crowe Ransom or any other facility in the Magnolia State's archipelago. It was up to him to lead the virtuous life that the Good Lord dictated. And if inmate Fine decided to abuse him, a cynical observer would claim that a certain justice was resultant from the interaction. Either way, the leaning screw was not going to stop leaning on Harry's account. If Harry needed treatment for his wounds, he could go see Dr. Turnipseed once more. If he needed some sort of apology for the officer refusing to come to his rescue, he could go and wait for the span of eternity. This guard apologized to nobody for anything. The State of Mississippi was truly lucky to have him.

Longing suddenly for the amphetamine injection that Turnipseed had proffered an hour before, Harry Cain meekly asked the guard which way was out.

"The exit from this life is found around every corner," he was told. "It is in every nook. It is within the calyx of every flower, and, needless to say, the barrel of every gun. It is my firm belief, furthermore," the guard told him, "that you had committed this response to memory long before it was uttered. You spoke the question merely to enact a social nicety, to deny your true nature even as you were plotting unsubtly to bring it to the fore. I realized this about your true nature long before you darkened our doorstep with your presence. I had a series of dreams about you and your final resting place," he said to Cain. "I had a sense of what you were doing on your tour of the South long before you had undertaken it."

This was not what (at least on a conscious level) Cain was angling for as a response.

"It's right this way I believe," Harry told the screw and started down a hallway in the jail off the guard station that seemed at first glance like he oughtn't by rights have been allowed to start down. The corridor he was strolling in, for example, was utterly narrow. There was a type of ornate entranceway that had to be passed through to get to the corridor. Which to Cain suggested the discouraging of public foot traffic.

Maybe this little hall led to the guards' locker room or some such semi-private area of the prison that civilians were discouraged from entering. Maybe there was the equivalent of a type of faculty lounge that was situated in this remote area of the pen.

The closer he came to such an off-limits area, the greater the protestations would become from those who saw its access as a rare employment perk.

"Well, anytime you want to," Cain said and waited for the expected heavy arm on the shoulder from the guard he had just passed by. Surely this tiny curving passageway couldn't have been the right way to anything more than a place into which he was not allowed. He was proceeding this way indeed merely to provoke. He had a need just then for limits to be placed on his own behavior. He had a need to be reined in.

He discerned belatedly that proscription was not merely a part of society but its soul. Society's strictures were in place to frustrate the appetites of monsters like him. There could be no successful negotiation between his brand of individualism and the civilized world that bordered him on all sides.

Which was another way of saying he longed for the leaning screw's heavy-handed manner (or even intimidating words) to hold him back. When it did not save him, he felt cheated and duped. He assumed the screw knew of Harry's intentions and was using reverse psychology on him. Maybe the narrow corridor led only to a loading dock. Or the guard was so indifferent about the faithful prosecution of his duties

that it didn't matter to him what sort of restricted space Harry violated in his perambulations. His nonchalance argued against the existence of such restrictedness. If there had been anything sacred to protect in here, the screw wouldn't have behaved in such a loutish way to begin with.

Twenty yards into what he could only assume now as the wrong path, Cain did not look back at the main corridor. As to do so would be to acknowledge his trepidation in moving forward. He didn't want to have to bear up to the angled smile growing out from the bottom of the screw's pink face when he saw the uncertain look within Harry. He didn't want to have to fend off an inquiry about what he was confused about from that redneck.

Maybe this was what the screw had lived for and had been planning ever since he had entered the prison. Strangers and even inmates at this facility likely got lost all the time. It was up to the screw to set them on the right path. And this he could do as he wished or not at all. He was in no hurry to do good deeds for his fellow men. Their opinion of him didn't matter to him at all.

He would be forgotten by Harry only in elongated stages. Simply because he seemed so emblematic of the prison itself.

"They don't do anything around here that is not required by law," Harry told himself about the officials at the facility. "And even then, they tend to cut corners."

Mississippi was very different from Alabama and even Florida with its test pigs and federal oversight regarding its electrical equipment. This facility seemed entirely removed from the United States completely. It seemed like more of a Third World entity almost, some sort of African-based institution that couldn't be bothered to toe an imaginary line vis-à-vis human rights. They all acted so casual around here simply because everything was permitted. Here was a type of facility that suggested a general decline in national conduct once taking into consideration that Mississippi was still America. Some earnest Washington reformer should rightly

look at the leaning prison guard and cringe. Harry thought it incumbent on the republic to get Mississippi in order. Wasn't going to happen from within, certainly. He assumed that the leaning screw and the entire chain of command he was part of had stopped caring long before they started. He assumed him as somebody beyond redemption, as personal redemption assumed a general sense of caring and internal moral discourse wherein the nature of the Good was rigorously explored.

Somebody could take a flamethrower to this place, he imagined, and they would all, screw and con together, watch the flesh rend from their bodies passively as nature allowed, absent the imperative to remain alive any longer than was absolutely necessary.

"In such a place as this no real truth can be arrived at," Harry told himself and pushed open the surprisingly light door that had blocked his way. Due to the corridor's curved parameters, he was completely hidden from the guard's view. He could likely hear him move if he was still there but that was all. He could hear if Harry had slammed the door shut behind him mistakenly. So, the need for quietness seized him to the point that, if only for a while he was up on tip toes. He didn't want to report his current location to the S.O.B. Maybe eventually he would come looking for him. At which point Harry would smile. He would say to the screw what took you so long or something like it. He would act genuinely surprised once told to vamoose.

On the other side of the door a corridor ran identical yet oppositely opposed to the one he had just traversed. He couldn't help taking it as a sign he was truly lost:

*Quelli ch'usurpa in terra il luogo mio,
il luogo mio, il luogo mio, che vaca
ne la presenza del Figliuol di Dio,
fatt'ha del cimitero mio cloaca
del sangue e de la puzza;*

"Now you come all this way in my place, my place, my place, and for what," Joe Arridy asked Harry and took out the train conductor's hat Warden Johnson had given him in days before his own execution.

Joe asked Harry Cain if he was going to stay for Fine's shooting and Harry said no.

Then Harry Cain died. His body folded up all around him like a sad tent skin deprived of its central pole.

It's typical of such a decadent, Joe thought and waited for his own being to collapse similarly until he was no more. Weird that he had managed to survive the vision that had dreamed him thus far. On the other hand: the world had shat out yet another paradox. Nobody was around presently but him to enjoy it. So, he was trying to make the most of what he beheld.

He wanted a cigarette. So he bummed one from the eyeless warden nearby. Then something stirred in the fleshy puddle at Joe's feet. He was waiting for a cry from it, advertising a new birth. He stared into the septic mass then became sick because of it. Soon he heard a voice coming from the opposite direction. For the longest time after that he was at a loss wondering exactly what to do. He didn't know either what the Good Lord intended for all parties concerned. He thought it had everything to do, however, with the trouble he caused his poor mother back home. He thought it was his fault and couldn't conceive that it wasn't entirely. He thought he had let everyone down.

Maybe he should call out and tell good folks what he thought it was that had occurred. He wanted to let them know that other folks simply were not there at the moment. Maybe he should back himself into a corner and wait. He didn't think the situation would change demonstrably within the next few minutes. He certainly couldn't imagine somebody looking on at the mess and thinking it was his fault in any way. An innocent bystander he was, as ever. He

lacked the intellectual capacity really to be of any trouble to anybody deliberately. He couldn't imagine someone putting the finger on him for what they freshly beheld and charging him with this crime.

Harry Cain, Joe realized, had brought this all on himself.

"I don't think he ever gathered much in the way of self-knowledge about him when he had the opportunity to do so," Joe said to Deputy Johnson who as usual was lingering in the scene's background within a shadow he had cast himself.

Worse had happened to better, anyway. And regardless, he wasn't going to mourn for a man he barely knew but didn't like regardless.

"I thought you and him soul mates," he said to the deputy then began to flick ash in the deputy's direction. Waiting for a response from the waking world (which was God's holy vision) was enough to frighten away the impure dream visions of Joe, the Deputy, and presently the mess of Harry Cain. They couldn't do it by themselves certainly. Just as no ordinary mortal could make the word flesh. They needed help from purer sources altogether. They were vestigial dream objects basically, all of them, products of a dead dreamer. Reality must hold if meaningful stories were to exist. They were trying to get the story back on track. The story was stuck in the mud temporarily. Harry's Death Trip needed to be commenced with. They all needed to be saved.

They all needed to rouse the dreamer temporarily if only to eliminate the dream.

Had to be done. As if God, realize, was merely a character in a story requiring a suitable end. He couldn't end merely as an afterthought. He needed a proper narrative arc accommodating (as E.A. Poe once put it) a beginning, a middle, and an end. He needed the space to die a proper death as Hamlet had upon his return to Elsinore. He needed a surrounding structure to have both existence and nonexistence validated independent of the absurdity that an uncertain conclusion would generate in a potential witness.

They all needed to die, but in a meaningful way. It was the first rule of storytelling. No accidents. And nothing resembling ironic discourse when it came to the life and death of the creator.

They needed a real person to come and jumpstart the story again. But the only man available to do the job was the shiftless screw who likely as not would continue down his own inertial path unbidden if not directly challenged.

"You dumb cracker! Y'all come down and get yours," Joe Arridy screamed at him and waited for the door he was behind to swing open. When it had of course he and the Deputy were nowhere to be seen. Harry Cain was there but in another form. Something strange about him that needed to be uncovered. The guard would do this after a fashion, perform his prescribed duty and vanish from the story altogether.

He wouldn't mind at all being disremembered. He had never wanted to be alive from the start.

Chapter Four: June 22, 2003

(Metamere, Louisiana)

Harry Cain thought about death a great deal while asleep in the Bosom of the Lord. He gradually became aware of the paradox involved in the awareness of nothing. As a corrective, he self-resurrected. Then he and his toxic karma split for Louisiana.

He was not so obsessed with worldly matters that he didn't realize that the details of a man's life were mere Christmas baubles draped on a hibernating tree. The tree would only bloom once away from the prying gaze of others. That was to say, he didn't assume that what happened meant anything. But this didn't stop him from checking the back of his trousers from time to time to see if they might be ripped.

"Hit the floor pretty hard back there, I suppose," Harry said to Transom Partridge, a moon-faced Jon Voight impersonator from Mississippi's humid armpit, Cockatoo. He was telling Transom the story of his self-resurrection only to kill a little time. Out here in the South's eternal green nothingness, spacetime warped cylindrically like spaghetti strands around a gourmand's fork. A journey of the length of a pencil tip would proceed in ninety mile increments likely and over the course of several days. He needed something to do during the years that it would take to reach the next stop.

He was bound for Metamere, Louisiana to witness a death by lethal injection courtesy of the state. He was trying to maintain himself mentally up until that time. He was trying to reason out what he would do when his death trip was over.

He had distinct ideas but no hard plans. He was trying to make it as easy on himself as possible. He was transitioning to something horrible and he was trying to lubricate the contracting womb of his destiny before it was too late.

Upon sitting down next to Transom in the westbound Greyhound, Harry had told Transom that if he wanted he could pass right through Cain's present form without interacting with it.

"It's unwholesome, pornographic even but it can be done," he told Mr. Partridge then recounted the time that, while dead, the revelation had come to him that such transubstantiation was not only possible but likely given the teetering realness of the present age. "I'm not saying this is something you should do, rightly," he told him, after receiving with gratitude the Tootsie Rolls Transom had offered the anemic-looking Cain as a form of sustenance. "I'm merely describing to you a definite state of being available for exploitation. That this is the way it is and likely always will be for you. There's no need to focus on it to any extent if you're squeamish about such matters," he said. "On your part there is no further action required. You serve your own dark God likely in a unique way. I assume you have your own needs and will act on these needs accordingly. You don't need somebody like me telling you what to do. You wouldn't take my advice, I suppose, if offered to you in earnest."

So it was that Harry Cain proclaimed to Transom his ability to disappear and reappear at will. This effect couldn't be conjured effortlessly by him. Rather, it could be conjured as the last link in an enormous thought chain.

"Stretched from here to the shining sea," he said to him, neglecting to state which sea he was talking about. Likely didn't matter, as a reflexive metaphor was in the midst of

being created. He had abandoned memory utterly for the imagination. He saw what others were incapable of seeing simply because what he saw was not there.

He thought that he was undead now, a watery vampire capable of walking through walls. He felt himself, therefore, simultaneously above and below the ordinary realms of man. Could perform magical feats but he lacked a soul that would fill his heart with joy whenever he did so. He felt it all part of a process, a transmutation in whose midst he was constantly roiling. He might perhaps wake up centuries from now to find himself reclaimed by God. Or he might be already consigned to his own hellish dream state constantly auto-looping ad infinitum.

Hell for so many was a never arriving Greyhound bus trip with a row mate like Harry Cain who didn't know when to shut the fuck up.

"Chthonian, black-eyed, with neither head nor tail precisely defined," he said to Transom Partridge, describing the vision he experienced just before dying the first time. The demon in his vision was in the form of an enormous flesh-eating worm that shat from the same two orifices that it ate from. To him, it was a harbinger not of what came next but rather what he had been on the verge of leaving. It was a personification of all the awfulness of humanity that had been on display for him thus far in his weeks down south. There was some as yet rough beast caught in mid-slouch amongst the kudzu-draped scenes of barbeque pits and prison spires that Cain had yet to capture properly in his writing. He needed to delve deeper at once and close his eyes so that they might be fully opened. He needed to get high and focus on each oily segment of the fearful apparition he was describing to Transom. He needed to be eaten by it and shat out of one side of it then have the excrement eaten again and so forth forever. He wasn't afraid of dying anymore, having been self-granted a second life. No, he had been brought back he assumed for this very purpose. He thought of himself

presently in strictly Arthurian terms. His quest, however, wasn't geared toward the relief of the blight of a nation but rather towards the expert description of its effects. He had embarked on a modest quest in order to be fulfilled. He thought anything else would have been supremely improper to express and impossible to realize.

The Tootsie Roll proffered by Transom was a product of Chicago and of mid-1990s vintage. It didn't yield to Harry's bite as expected but rather shattered in a brittle, crystalline way like so much obsidian in a knapper's hands.

"I'd ask you for another," Harry said to him after checking his gum line for shrapnel, "but I don't think my dental work could stand the strain." Indeed, it was the first food he had eaten in over thirty hours. What was more distracting than the staleness of the confection was the sugar rush it affected once it had entered his blood. Knocked him loopy for a minute, exactly as the amphetamine he and his band mates used to mainline had done when on the road between gigs at six in the morning and mere black coffee wouldn't do. Speed gave him the intimacy of being born aloft on the wings of eagles. It provided false revelations experienced spontaneously with no object of revelation present. It was all very strange and off-putting enough for a young person to think of it as decadent fun even as simple biochemistry lay at its root and contained nothing like profundity within its corpus. A false God, you might say, staring through the vacated space forged by the real one.

To Harry, speed was one more heresy to be forgotten about. Though others, such as Raising Cain's first drummer, Simp Martin, would vociferously beg to differ. Simp was enraptured by speed, in love with it, and forsook all other pleasures of the flesh for its graceless, motor-driven buzz. Simp's heart had exploded in his chest at age thirty-two in the midst of burglarizing his own foreclosed home. It was three weeks before the cops found him there but only because of the smell. By then, the rats had already done their thing with his

extremities. These creatures always went for the eyes first. Which was a mystery for Harry, given what he assumed as that organ's relative lack of sustenance. Perhaps with them it was a case of low-hanging fruit. The teeth that many of them needed to gnaw bone with had not yet been fully developed. As a group, they figured they would get to the meaty part later.

It was sad for Harry to recall the reason for the Ray-Bans Simp wore at the visitation. To counter their incongruity, the undertaker had dressed Simp up in a leather jacket to make it seem as if he was ready to go on onstage. But Cain alone amongst his bandmates knew the reason for the artifice. An undertaker could only do so much with ping-pong balls and the flesh-colored rubber used to simulate eyelids in such situations. Hours before the visitation, Simp's mother took one look at her only son's remains and fainted. It was Harry's idea to dress him up like a biker. The Ray-Bans and the leather jacket were his. He had experienced unaccountable guilt over Simp's demise and felt the need to aid him at this sorrowful moment.

When Harry died for the second time, he would do so in such a way as to avoid the tidying up of his body for display in a visitation.

"The best way to go for all parties concerned," he declared to Transom Partridge seemingly *ab nihilo*, "is to throw yourself into a volcano. No fuss, no muss afterwards for those you have left behind. The memories of people usually fade before the bones decompose. And in this case memories will be all that will remain. Even the ash will prove elusive to possess."

The only trick in this instance would be to locate an active volcano near enough to make the body's disposal relatively efficient. From here, he realized the nearest such feature was Chichonal in Chiapas straight across the Gulf of Mexico. Harry thought it was due for another eruption just about the time he arrived. He thought it imperative for him and Bones

to make a stop there just after a blood sacrifice was rendered in Yucatan.

Caught by the tidal forces of existence's distorted continuum, Cain was experiencing his own birth, life, and death presently as a single instant. Which was to say, with one event blending to the other effectively enough to render distinctions about each null in void. This was an absurdity from a human perspective. But he didn't experience it as such. He was overtired for the most part and couldn't be bothered to honor the distinctions related to ordinary logic. He just honored the universe the way it was, devoid of the need to make sense of its effects. Eventually he might choke on the absurdities being presented before him and pushback. Presently, he simply abided nonsense. He was three Tootsie Rolls away from reasoning like a normal person. He needed to be off the bus and in a warm bed. The road was grinding on him mightily like the worn brake pads on this vintage bus. They all needed to be at a stop. They all needed physical repair so that they might perform per their factory specs.

The Joe Buck costume that Transom Partridge intended to wear on Hollywood Boulevard in hopes of gathering fame for himself was stuffed in a garment in the overhead compartment.

"It's Voight's greatest role," he said to Harry Cain when the conversation had inexplicably shifted in that direction. "No, not *Coming Home* certainly," he said, "not *The Champ*, not *Conrack* either," Transom said flashing his impressive knowledge of the JV oeuvre. The reason he said this had nothing to do with any objective criteria. To him, the greatness of *Midnight Cowboy* was self-evident like the warmth of the sun. And Jon Voight as Joe Buck was the sun's burning core.

The film spoke to him in so many ways like you might have assumed would have been the case with a more contemporary film such as Disney's *Toy Story*. It brought to mind so many unexpressed scenes of sexual longing and

despair. To die of consumption (or whatever it was Ratso died of in the end) in a slow-moving Florida-bound bus was a touching end for men judged too sensitive to live in such a degraded place as the US of A, circa 1969. It was, he assumed, Joe Buck's fate, too, though this had occurred well after the credits had rolled. It would be Transom Partridge's fate too in whatever Hollywood hovel he found himself surviving in years after his big move out there. He was under no delusion that he was moving to Hollywood to become a major star. He knew the lot of a street performer as being one step up from a wino on L.A.'s famous Skid Row. But he had the need to create a sense of poetry about himself concerning his demise. Couldn't stand Cockatoo, Mississippi hardly and its vulgar excesses of insularity and self-satisfaction that were on display six days of week. Folks there didn't know what poetry was all about (and that included the psalms of the Bible). They could never maneuver around the *thou shalt not* part of the Good Book held somewhere in Exodus as he recalled. They skipped right from that to Revelations and the beast with seven heads and ten horns. They didn't see the beauty in their own religion and were poorer for it. They couldn't imagine sex and devotion being paired together, despite what the famous song of the scripture specified:

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine;
your anointing oils are fragrant;
your name is oil poured out;
therefore virgins love you.
Draw me after you; let us run.
The king has brought me into his chambers*

"Out there in Hollywoodland," Transom said to Cain pointing west to the Golden State, "there's more shit than diamonds for the grasping, I suppose. Though this only spurs me on to take root there. I'm getting what I deserve in a way," he said, "which is to suffer for my own idea of art. Last good

movie ever made by Hollywood I should let you know was *Apocalypse Now*, vintage of 1979. It's all been straight downhill from there. They have mere ghosts of good actors now rather than the real thing. There's not a place in the culture anymore for one such as me. A true artiste! And looking at you I don't believe you'd bother to disagree slightly."

Indeed, Harry Cain had struggled to recall the last movie he had watched all the way through with satisfaction. But he had stopped being devotional to all cultural objects long ago. He felt it unbecoming of a grown man. He felt it an alternative to a serious contemplation of worldly matters. This he felt was crucial should any spiritual advancement on his part be enacted.

Transom in fact only bore a passing resemblance to young Jon Voight and a good deal of this was due to a dye job and a pair of blue contact lenses that were on the verge of producing a protracted eye infection in both eyes due to improper methods of cleansing.

"I don't believe that one should devote one's life to morbid self-attention," Transom told Harry quoting yet another favorite film of his and recalled his upbringing in Cockatoo by his widower English teacher father and a cast of oddball family members that seemed to come and go from his orbit as they pleased. All the movies in question he saw via blue-ray disc with some needing to be ordered from a store in Memphis and driven down by his father as constantly evolving Mississippi blue laws worked against the viewing of such "indecent" films as *Midnight Cowboy* on any medium. The fact that the Academy Award winning film might have been illegal to possess in the state only served to increase its value in young Transom's estimation. He saw the picture as a great metaphorical explanation concerning the Care of the Soul. He saw in Voight's character, Joe Buck, a kindred spirit as well as somebody whose moral rectitude was an object lesson for all humanity.

"He's a dumb hick just like me. Just like me innocent as a new born dove," Transom said as Harry struggled with his faulty memory of the film to see if this was actually true. "Well, he learns in the film," Transom said. "He learns sometimes innocence can be a despicable thing. Something to not be fretted over when it is lost. He learns it is not such a crime to think about others complexly. But to do so you'd have to admit that you're more complex too than your innocence will ever let you admit."

As he was speaking, a figure with tar black skin emerged from the shadow of the lean-to that doubled in this town as a bus terminal and proceeded to pick up imaginary coins fallen into the dirt road that doubled as this town's main street. He bent over and placed the coins in his palm and stared at each one admiringly. He was barefoot and, to judge only by his closed mouth sunken contours, toothless. Another man soon emerged from the shadows eventually and escorted the first man to the curb. The bored look on his face communicated the impression that this was a routine procedure. Maybe once a day at best or even once an hour. But nobody including the man himself was amused.

You needed to realize, Transom said, a man's highest calling on this earth was to empathize with his brother. Everything else was self-interested acquisitiveness. Various acts of bad behavior could be disguised as good works when looked at uncritically. A truly good man should care only for how a man's actions affected others, not himself. He was saintly in this concern for purity of motive. He felt we would all be judged in a way by a higher power. He felt maybe we already had been judged and our ordinary niggling lives were the results.

Cain didn't believe this even slightly and he started to tell Transom this just as the bus rolled out and seemed to intersect with a hidden object in the dust. Maybe a mushy body lying there that unlike the first deranged man spotted couldn't help staying in the way. It wrenched the bus to the degree that

even satiated travelers felt the need to comment on the occurrence. Something inexplicable had happened to them and they were excited by it. It gave them all hope that one day they would be off the bus. Made it seem that at least in this journey there was an end. Had to be absolutely. And maybe sooner than later.

According to Transom Partridge, the ride on such an intrastate route as this could only be tolerated through a studious denial that one was in motion to begin with.

"I stare at the polished tips of my boots for hours on end," he said to Harry, "and imagine I'm back in my bedroom half-asleep." By doing so he said the more vulgar attributes of travel were able to be filtered out almost entirely. There would be no disappointment that one had failed to arrive somewhere once one had forgotten the transit. The journey's end would be a pleasant surprise for one rather, accomplished as if by magic in a few seconds. For a brief period, it would re-instill in one the wonderment of youth. It would make them reconsider the world as a truly benign place rather than the empty container circumstances over time had conditioned men into conceptualizing it as being.

For Cain however, the journey was proving less distressing than the realization that he was in some way consigned to this highway by circumstances beyond his control. He thought when the ride ended, his life was bound to end too. He had been sent on the journey to see something. And after its witnessing he would have no reason to remain alive.

Like some spawning salmon, his existence had become provisional, subordinated to the act of physical travel. It couldn't have been any other way. He thought he was of nothing suddenly, *por nada*. He thought he was at a remove from ordinary reality altogether.

More like a ghost than even he with his considerable powers of description was capable of capturing, Harry assumed the end for him would be similar to this decelerating

Death Trip 124

bus sliding off to some even more narrow side road then unto some even more terrible place than had thus far been encountered. Driver was a junkie and maybe he wanted to fix in earnest away from the prying eyes of peace enforcement. He could have his high and sleep it off on the little fold-up cot they equipped such buses with for a transcontinental trip. Maybe he could walk off to the woods and sleep there. Oh, the critters around here which included several species of diamondbacks and panthers would likely have fun with him. No need to return to his ordinary job once he survived the ordeal. He would be liberated from circumstance after that point to do as he wished. No man would ever look at him again and see a slave. He would by then be the opposite of what Harry Cain imagined himself to be at present. He might as well not even have been in possession of a brain. Didn't need it hardly. He might as well have been absent of a will altogether.

Just before taking off again, two goobers in bib overalls climbed onto the bus and commenced to waving finger guns at the bus riders as if this was the funniest joke in the world and they had thought it up by themselves.

"We the terrorists in this here outfit!" one of 'em said in the general direction of Cain. "Yo' money or your motherfucking life! Preferably in that order!"

Somebody's radio was on meanwhile and turned (naturally) to a Pentecostal minister recalling a particularly sadistic version of hell.

"Good luck to you and yours," Harry said to Transom Partridge and scanned the bus futilely in search of a metal object to use as a cudgel. Upon the goobers' entrance, he had made the decision straight on to break the nearest window and make a jump for it. Even with the bus in full motion.

He might have assumed that once he jumped, the woods would break his fall. He was that kind of wishful thinker at this stage in his devolving. He had no real understanding of what it meant to be alive in the world and struggling. He

didn't think things through or couldn't rather. Ever since being reborn, he had behaved as one not entirely emotionally involved in the drama of life.

Once in Metamere, he hailed a cab and found a motel. Mud Holmes, his editor and occasional friend, was there in the lobby when he arrived, fanning himself with a pornographic flyer imported from New York. Not knowing the name of this motel, he claimed regardless to be waiting for Harry's arrival. This was the only motel in town likely. Either that or the whole encounter was being dreamed.

Mudget Holmes, whose real name was Marvin Mitchelson Jr., had for this particular trip purchased a voodoo walking cane in New Orleans supposedly once owned by Screaming Jay Hawkins and used in his act extensively.

"Head of a real human skull. In fact, m'man, real bone," Homes said to Cain seconds after laying eyes on him in the tiny lobby of this dive. This motel was smaller and dirtier even than the Tropicana motel in Florida. It was a pestilence upon the American landscape and stood in immediate need of firebombing. Its lobby stunk of compressed grime, saturated with the Pine-sol that a lazy custodian had applied in lieu of an actual cleaning. Bugs in the woodwork likely to judge by the black streaks apparent on the paneling that only Cain somehow had the perceptiveness to detect. Around here they let the vermin roam free, perhaps as a tribute to Mother Earth. They were ace environmentalists in their own way. A guest who would complain about the unwanted guests in his or her room would likely be severely upbraided by the sandal-wearing proprietor and asked to leave the next morning. Note that the act of luxuriating in decay was constantly being mistaken for a state of Zen. They all needed to go, therefore, Harry thought, Zen-master and decadent at once. He firmly believed there was no differentiating religious longing from decadence. Supposed enlightened men would walk into such an establishment as this and pronounce it quaint. He appreciated Mud Holmes for his refusal to sentimentalize his

surroundings. He thought him evolved in this one aspect: that he had the ability to accurately characterize his surroundings even though he was empty of a desire completely to change them for the better.

The shtick Screamin' Jay used to perform with his skull cane was of course once having emerged from his coffin. He would stride around with it for a while then wave it above the heads of select audience members to invoke the *loa* of old. A voodoo priest, inscrutable in his dedication to the old gods. (In reality, Screamin' Jay was a classically trained pianist from Cleveland, Ohio. He fathered seventy-five children and had not a lick of religion to him. [Google that shit if you doubt it. There's a website in his honor set up just to keep track of his progeny. He was a great man.]

"In the dark, its eyes glow enough for you to read a book by at night," Mud Holmes said to Harry holding up the cane's head for ordinary daylight perusal. Must have been a baby head that the skull was plucked from as it was barely larger than a softball. Holmes would go onto tell Harry that a witchdoctor had performed his magic with head shrinking before the handle was readied. But this was a bit of hokum that even Screamin' Jay would have demurred from. Indeed, the plaster orb on close inspection was the detail that negated the effect. The cane's wood was dark and knotty enough to pass muster as an object of magic in any horror film. There was a piece of black burlap stapled to its bottom meant as a stopper that seemed cut from Goody Proctor's seared dress as an anonymous sick fuck's memento mori.

Maybe Holmes had hooked up a battery and LED circuit within the skull that caused its eyes to glow green. It would in the midst of one of *Filth* magazine's frequent pot parties initiate concentric waves of ribald giggles once the lights turned out. The glowing skull represented an adolescent-level of humor that only the truly stupid or stoned would appreciate fully. To everybody else it simply seemed reflective of a callow fascination with death like kids meeting

up in a graveyard. It didn't seem hardly becoming of a young man termed New York's latest media mogul in various trade industry rags.

Rattling around in the lapel pocket of Holmes' canary-yellow zoot suit was the skull's u-shaped jaw bone.

"You can detach the whole structure from the cane and get it talk to you," he said to Harry after placing the stick across his lap. Somebody like Cain he surmised who had been through the ringer in his life wouldn't have been impressed with a skull with glowing eyes even as a joke. He wouldn't have even chuckled when Holmes worked the skull's jaw up and down in the service of pantomiming rude things. A more circumspect person than Mud might have left the Screamin' Jay cane back in his Williamsburg office. But never having been to this part of the world he felt that it was somehow apropos. He wanted to wave it around the rednecks who lived around here so that they might be freaked out. He wanted to cast a spell onto the condemned so that their souls would take flight and the executioner would be cheated. Would serve 'em right anyway for making him come all the way down here.

There was not a head shop nor a reputable drug dealer likely from here to Chicago. Mud Holmes had already opined twice to Harry in four minutes that the Louisiana Purchase was a mistake. Napoleon had swindled the country completely out of its hard-earned cash. And now the country should make good and sell the area back to France.

The execution in fact had been scheduled for tomorrow at midnight which gave Harry only a short time window to haul his ass over to the pen and set up an interview.

"I could of swore you were due here yesterday," Holmes told him but neglected to press him on the point. Harry he took as a free spirit, a rock star (there were no ex-rock stars as far as Mud was concerned. And being a rock star, furthermore, had nothing to do with the number of records sold), and actually a pretty good writer (though on that point

there was fierce debate between Holmes and his editor A____, who generally adhered by the old newspaperman's rule of making one's stories light, tight, bright, and [most of all] right). What was indisputable, however, was this series' appeal to Holmes' hipster clientele. He was here, therefore, to oversee the series' final legs, to make sure that nothing had gone wrong up until the likely spectacular conclusion within ten days. Fan that he was of Harry's, Holmes had to admit a certain negativity in his aura that caused one to assume the worst both for him and of him at once. It wasn't just that he was glum and no fun. He seemed unprepared to do whatever he had to in this world to be a success. This was unacceptable in Holmes' accounting of existence. Mud was above all else a hard worker. He had no tolerance for that sort who simply gave up.

The canary yellow zoot suit Mud wore was tailored by Mr. Z's Fine Clothing and Haberdashery of Astoria, Queens which was exactly one mile as the crow flew from where Mud grew up.

"You'd look good in this, Bruce," Holmes said to another motel guest who had commented, not in an unfriendly way, that he'd need a pair of sunglasses worn indoors to look on that suit with any sort of intensity. Actually, this man, who weighed four hundred pounds, might look good only in the same model, not the exact suit that the hundred and thirty-five-pound Holmes was presently wearing. You would need to roughly double the cloth allotment for that good ole boy and increase the waist size by at least twenty inches. He still might wind up looking good in the light of such alterations. Mr. Z did good work. But then again, "Bruce" was in possession of a body type that tended to overwhelm any attempt to disguise its physical parameters in the same manner as a caged elephant raging against its chains.

Mud Holmes thought grotesque crackers like this should keep their sartorial opinions to themselves and leave comedy to the professionals. An insular Brooklynite in all other

matters, nevertheless, Mud was wise enough not to speak his mind so blatantly to people he had assumed as natives of a foreign country. He felt the average white southerner to be rash, racist, and dim-witted. He thought there was no difference between their everyday reality and their portrayal in the media. Until proven differently this was what he assumed. He was on his best behavior *because* of his cultural ignorance, not despite it. He didn't want to push the yokels' buttons out of fear of violent reprisal. He didn't see them as equals.

The four hundred pounder in fact was a senior prison official with a rack of vintage Bill Blass's in his climate-controlled closet back home. Seeing himself as a buttoned-down exec, neither he nor any of the kin he bankrolled and therefore controlled would have been caught dead in such an outfit that Mud Holmes was wearing even on a dare. He thought it was self-evident. But perhaps not when filtered through Yankee eyes. He would be seeing Holmes again in the near future in different circumstances and would be able to bust his balls in earnest. He would make him take that damn gangster outfit off at the first checkpoint in order so it could be incinerated. He would declare it a threat to prison morale if asked why.

Grown men did not walk around in such pajamas like this. Holmes seemed prepared to make a joke out of his dress, but to the four hundred-pound official this was no laughing matter. He felt the line beyond civilization and chaos to be ever-shifting like a wave function. He felt the need to take remedial action constantly.

The freaks and losers of this world must be made to suffer. The prison official liked chicken fricassee very much. He felt the need to not take shit from anybody hardly.

Three days from now, Mud Holmes would dream of the four hundred pounder as a gelatinous blob from some invading planet and never think about him again. To him he was just another oddly-shaped satellite, a moon dislodged

from its orbit that bore no resemblance whatsoever to any person he would ever give careful consideration to. He never asked for his name, for example. He was just a bit player in a weird carnival-like scene. But ever since sprouting pubic hair, Homes' life had been filled to the brim with such tense scenes. The characters in them were colorful but flat. He thought they lacked souls utterly and were vaguely contemptible because of this absence.

Why he had come down here to Louisiana, apart from his hipster holiday in hell, was to speak the good news to Harry. He was going to announce that he was in the midst of parlaying the Death Trip articles into a motion picture deal with Fox Searchlight.

"They think of it as a *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*-type scenario, a type of Huck and Nigger Harry adventure set amongst a background of mental defectives, snake handlers, and George Wallace supporters that comprise the modern South," Mud told Harry once they had both relocated to Harry's room right off the establishment's kidney-shaped pool. The pool was suffering from an algae infestation at the moment. Shit, it was hot enough to go for a dip inside it regardless! This was Harry's intention after sleeping for twelve hours. He had reached the point long since where his body had overcome his brain as well as the little sub-routine of free will that philosophers and spiritualists of every stripe wax ecstatic over (for some reason). He was for all intents asleep now as he listened to Holmes drone on about matters pressing only to him and his nebulous backers. Nothing registered with anything he said. Which was all well enough because that which he said was complete nonsense. Mud Holmes was a narcissist of the first rank who couldn't be shamed into keeping his self-passion (his emotional masturbation) to himself long enough for others to remove themselves from its presence. Nobody wanted to hear this shit, least of all Harry Cain. Harry was sure to be swindled by Mud out of whatever potential profits his labor brought forth.

Likely, the editor wouldn't even be speaking of financial matters to him at all if it wasn't in the bag. Despite his compulsion to crow, Holmes was usually kept on a short leash by his lawyers. All his superficial wildness was for the delectation of potential investors. He had hit upon a successful business model: recycling bohemian clichés to those too unlettered to see them as such. He had no intention about engaging in a real bit of economic radicalism by cutting one of his writers in on the spoils. No profit sharing, nothing like that as far as he was concerned. All the hemming and hawing about the downtrodden of New York and the brown-skinned prison population of the U.S.A. and the unjustness of the nation's drug laws was mere enticement to the trust fund kids of Williamsburg to get them to read the free publication's ads. Mud Holmes' personal politics leaned heavily to the libertarian right. He was a not so secret fan of George W. Bush, despite his misgivings about the multiple Muslim wars presently raging. He liked twelve-year-old scotch, thousand dollar an hour whores, and Switzerland's secretive banking system most of all. A man for all seasons, you might say. When the time came to cut to cut the dopey white Rastafari of New York's hippest borough loose, he would do so with relish. These effeminate cunts had given Mud the willies bigtime, truth be told. They weren't so comfortable in their white skin as they likely needed to be to get ahead in this harsh world. They had an advantage in life that they were refusing to play. This didn't mark them as compassionate in Holmes' view so much as delusional and sycophantic. They were always looking to the black man for approval. They were always trying to adopt a narrative of suffering for themselves that did not jibe with their life stories slightly.

Cain's life story, it should be mentioned, would be on prominent display in Holmes' filmic treatment of his Death Trip sojourn. Oliver Stone, that wretch of the Left, had already signaled his interest in helming the project. Cameron Crowe's agent had emitted a non-committal noise which to

Holmes was interpreted as interest. He'd rather have Stone than Crowe if only because he could jerk him around more. Hollywood money seemed to have dried up bigtime for Oliver after playing footsie with the anti-Semitic left over in Europe. He needed to keep his priorities straight. But his loss was Mud Holmes' gain.

Overall, he didn't know what the fuck he was doing in terms of film production, but this wouldn't stop a man of destiny. Mud would direct the fucker himself if need be, relying on technical people for guidance. He could have Harry star in it as himself and claim no contractual obligation to pay him as it could be conceived of as a publicity duty stipulated in his original literary contract.

The only problem he would encounter would be trying to shoehorn this skeletal decadent's true-to-life exploits into a traditional three act narrative complete with a hero one could root for.

"The problem with you, well, with your *character*," Mud Holmes said to Harry momentarily putting on his screenwriter's cap, "is that there's no fat on your soul to be shed. You don't engage with the world very much. Therefore, how can there be any third act epiphany revealing that life is worth living and love is all there is? And blah, blah, the fuck blah, so forth and so on? This flick needs to hold a viewer's interest long enough merely just for the closing credits to roll. Everything but porn is anti-climactic nowadays. We're not looking for a lasting change in our hero, just an acquired affect that will keep the ticket buying public from demanding its money back in droves after a non-ending involving a character who learns nothing from his travails even after it's outlined for him in big block letters."

Give movie "Harry" a dog maybe, Harry Cain suggested. Which let's say belonged to the first victim he encountered on the *Death Trip*, Charles Kilpatrick. Charles had entrusted the continued care of the little feller to Harry in a tear-filled scene in Act One. And in Act Two, the pup runs off and is flattened

by one those omnipresent semis rolling up these too narrow southern roads at an alarming rate of speed. Yes, this could be the emotional rock on which *Death Trip's* protagonist "Harry Cain" built his Hollywoodland church. Harry could swear bloody vengeance for the pup while crouching over the paste of its remains. Yes, it would be convincing enough to sell some tickets surely or at least stave off some Rotten Tomatoes being hurled in the picture's direction. The dog could have a woman attached to it, subsequently trailing behind a romantic entanglement behind her like a concrete block on a rusty chain. Audience members needed to root for Harry to do the right thing! Women and dogs were paramount signposts on the road to moral goodness, per Hollywood. Redemption couldn't have been achieved without 'em.

Holmes' main disadvantage regarding the successful execution of this project was that he was too inexperienced to know when enough was enough. Or when it was not nearly enough.

"I'm a babe in the woods regarding this project and will take any help that I can get," he said to Cain staring out at the algae-filled pool. It made Mud wonder whether there was any more suitable residence to be had in this backwater. At its worst, this place seemed a send-up of a small-town motel more so than the real McCoy. Which was not to say he was an expert in this area either, but this was his first impression. Couldn't the pool whose cleaning apparatus was obviously either malfunctioning or non-existent, be drained to eliminate the eyesore on display? Simple enough, he thought. But the proprietor of the establishment might well have admitted pride at the mess on display. He or she likely was a redneck involved in doing an ongoing caricature of a redneck. Which was itself filtered through concentric layers of self-consciousness enough to throw one off the scent completely regarding the way one truly felt about things and the cultural niche he or she inhabited in society.

Mud thought Harry could help him with the script apart from the facetious ideas he had already offered about squashed puppies and the need for his character to be made over as a romantic lead.

"This is your big break, fella," he said to Harry splayed out on the bed. Presently having reached that point of exhaustion where the sleep state was involuntary, none of this spiel had made any sort of headway against the tidal force of his unconsciousness. If Harry had been awake, however, he would have pointed out that it wasn't his big break. As presently he was devoid of the aspiration to "make it." He was presently as ambitious as the rotting trunk of a felled tree. The little sliver of fame he had been granted in his former life had been enough to throw him off the stuff for good. It revolted him absolutely. He really didn't care if he was "known." Due to his involuntary isolation in the trailer park, he had come to see celebrity as an endorphin-laced enticement to a corporatized version of self-actualization. Only dummies, tyros or those so emotionally fragile that a constant stream of positive feedback was required for them to avoid offing themselves, desired fame enough to actually try and achieve it. Cain by contrast was legitimately content to grow more ignominious by the day. He thought eventually he would look in the mirror and not recognize who was staring back. As far as he was concerned this would be a moment for rejoicing. He would claim a milestone having been reached in his spiritual development. He would be at an opposite pole from the popular culture. He felt this was necessary if he was going to spiritually evolve. He would never be involved in any kind of Hollywood production on his own volition. Such a spectacle spoke to him in a deeply negative way. It made him think his worst suspicions of other people were well founded. That they were leeches constantly in search of fresh blood. That they were essentially soulless and put on this earth merely to torment him.

Once he woke, the ball-busting on Mud Holmes' part surely would start in earnest. That would be the point that Harry would start to take seriously everything Holmes said. Likely, if only because of the law of averages, the project would never be launched. If it had, he might seek the services of a lawyer to get it stopped. He couldn't imagine himself ever being objectified in that way, ramrodded into a type of soft anti-hero's guise.

"Don't believe anything that comes to mind immediately," Cain said to no recognizable figure whatsoever in the recesses of an unaccounted dream and disremembered his circumstances completely. He was hard against a sandstone wall just then, dodging tracer fire from forces he believed to be friendly with Iraq's Revolutionary Guard. He was trying to disabuse himself totally of the need to believe in the scene. Even while watching it on TV, the action of the Second Gulf War had a surrealistic quality to it removed from the rhyme or reason of why American forces were even there. Perhaps it was the effect of a continuous series of misunderstandings rendered by men who as leaders of their respective nations ought to have known better but were somehow incapable of the requisite humility required to admit mistakes. A weird search thus far had been ongoing for so-called "weapons of mass destruction" in the Iraqi desert and points to the west and south. That they would not find any jibed perfectly with the sense of free-floating craziness that the entire operation had seemed to broadcast as if emanate more from the American Empire's collective unconscious than any historical gear-grinding that caused the conflict to come into being. Cain thought if there were stores of yellow cake uranium discovered somewhere in some underground factory, the entire scene would have shifted at that point to paradoxically resemble a type of reserved game of Stratego than any true-to-life war. The more realistic the scene became, the less its reason for it existing in the first place would be. The Gulf War was a rabbit hole war devoid of any

true rationale to it. Eventually it would expire in the manner of all bad dreams under the weight of its collective absurdities. Even twenty years later nobody would be aware of its cause. Few except the native Iraqis would give it much thought. The history books would simply elide its history in favor of generalities. George W. Bush would be judged a belligerent president. And that would be it as far as an in-depth study of the war went.

From there, in what might be surmised as the dream distance of Harry's dream, a burka-clad woman was leaning over the fragment of one torn-up wall calling out to Harry Cain. She had her arms held outward which was not in a position of surrender or even of askance. She was pleading with him merely to take some action. She wanted him to approach. But somehow even as he was aware of the situation's unreality, he was anxious about such a maneuver. Snipers could pick him off in the no-man's-land between them, for example. Or he might get halfway across and fail to recall the reason for his journey in the first place. He sensed somehow that what she had to tell him was not good news. Nothing that somebody had to communicate to another person in such a landscape could likely be conceived as good news. Out here all the sustaining truths were implicit in the landscape and one's ability to abstract from it. There was likely no sentence ever uttered in this landscape that caused a person to shed tears of joy. Even for a dream nothing here was as it should be. Everything lacked the lightness of dreams, as if its images were so corrosive as to destroy the barrier between reality and unreality. It seemed far more serious than dreams should be and therefore laced with mortal peril. As the cliché went, to die in a dream was to die in earnest. He didn't how this was ever accomplished precisely but he assumed that to die in this dream would be to die for real. And he assumed that the vision itself in front of him was death itself waiting merely to self-identify.

Logical procedure in such a situation would be to stay put and wait for rescue in the form of a different dream taking shape. Presently, however, Cain was literally out of his mind. He simply walked across the plain and stood between the woman's raised arms. He was waiting for a signal about what she intended with him. He wasn't over-sure of himself. Nevertheless, he was waiting for her to get it over with and possibly, in the manner of cinema, reveal her identity to him.

The woman laid her arms on Harry's dreamed-of shoulders and asked him how he was holding up.

"It varies from moment to moment," he told her and considered her eyes, wondering if there was some sort of truth there to be inadvertently revealed.

She asked him if he could recommend any Iraqi nightspots. Harry said he couldn't. Pretty much a teetotaler he told her since his band broke up and this went for booze as well as hard drugs.

"Once you stop drinking, your social life pretty much dries up and blows away," he told the woman whose identity by degrees was becoming known to him. A fierce wind had picked up and was removing rudiments of the burka by degrees. Soon her face would be revealed to him. Then he wouldn't have to wonder about her at all and what her dark intentions were with him.

My advice the woman said to Harry Cain, though not in so many words, *is to find yourself a quiet place in the world and stay there for good.* Where that would be exactly, she neglected to say. But she indicated it was someplace far from here. She said she didn't know the exact way toward it anyway.

"Just click your heels together and wait for it to happen," she said to Harry and seemed to smile through that part of the veil that was still on her. Parts of her face were flying off along with her clothes. He didn't know how to take any of this or if she was aggrieved by her circumstances. Or if the gradual loss of her exteriority was undesired. It looked like it stung a bit to have bits of herself fly off like unattached puzzle

pieces. On the other hand, this was a simple outsider's observation about a non-existent event. He supposed if he had a genuine question to ask he should do so quickly as her mouth and jaw seemed on the verge of parting from her face rapidly. It was past that point she could have answered. And in a way, this might have been the entirety of the dream's meaning: that it was an object lesson warning against the vice of waiting too long for an answer. He needed to ask rapidly or be satisfied in receiving only silence as an answer. There was no need to be polite in such an environment. Cain needed to seize the opportunity when it came along. So many of his problems encountered in waking life stemmed from his inability to be forthright in his dealings with others. A little silverfish of a human was Harry, slinking along in the darkened corners of life waiting for a boot heel to descend. In this dream, merely, he was telling himself to hurry up and ask. But he felt also he already knew of the answer that was about to be given.

The desert of America, the woman would tell Harry, was very much like the desert of Iraq. In that its brutal nature was self-evident as opposed to needing unearthing like Saddam's mythical bunker on the outskirts of Baghdad.

"The reason we're both here looking around," she said, "is that we tend to elect leaders who are a reflection of our worst instincts," she said to him flatly. With what was left of her face, she looked at Harry Cain waiting for a nod of assent. Off went the chin and lip combo seconds after the silk veil was removed by the area's relentless breeze. She had said everything she had been physically capable of saying at that point. Very soon the entire notion of her would be gone. The memory of her would not survive her physical eradication from this dreamscape. This was a truly obliterating wind. Soon it would blow away even its own physical underpinnings enough to the point that nothing of itself could be recalled.

A dreamed-of wind strong enough to blow away even the dreamer himself. Harry thought it an excellent end for himself and opened his body to the effect. Eventually he would wake and be reclaimed as something different. It had happened and would continue to happen constantly while on this trip. He thought himself lucky to be in possession of such foreknowledge. The outcome was the same, but there was a certain dignity involved in knowing the outcome. Like America itself, eventually he would be reclaimed and recycled. Just the way it was in the world. He didn't think there was anything cruel in such proceedings. He was welcoming of the change when it finally occurred.

The next evening, hours before the death sentence by lethal injection was to be carried out, Mud Holmes threw a costume party at a rented plantation house five miles outside of Metamere. The theme of this party was *Ghosts of Death Penalties Past*.

You were supposed to come as your favorite executionee. Either state-sanctioned or privately rendered, the e-invite that had been in Cain's inbox upon waking had directed. White as some of the cotton balls still harvested on some corner of this plantation, most of Holmes' invitees were ignorant of capital punishment's prejudicial slant. They wanted to conflate the party's socio-political slant by pantomiming dead celebrities. So many to choose from that there was little research required. So many people became indelibly famous because of their grisly deaths. Their attenuated presence at such a gathering was tribute, not parody. Which would make for a more festive evening than if, as per Holmes' original idea, they had not been allowed to attend from the get go.

After seconds of consideration, Harry decided to go as New York-era John Lennon. He tore the sleeves of an NYC t-shirt and put on a pair of lens-less wire bifocals absconded from the motel's lost and found. Then he went in search of a corduroy Breton to wear over his jet-black hair. He thought if

challenged to do so, he could muster a Liverpool accent. Just don't ask him to sing a Beatles song.

So it was that on the evening of December 8th, 1980 when news of the hippie king's assassination reached Harry in the basement of his parent's home in suburban Detroit, his overriding thought was "who cares?"

"They weren't such a big influence on us, to be entirely up front about it," Harry said when queried of his costume choice by one of Mud's masking invitees. He was speaking of the Fab Four specifically, but it might have been the span of Lennon's musical collaborators, especially those who played on "Imagine." Harry Cain hated "Imagine" with a passion that transcended his usual nihilistic indifference concerning cultural matters. He felt "Imagine" was a betrayal of the whole of humanity. He felt by itself it earned Lennon some lower circle in hell right next to the pedophile priests of the True Church.

The Beatles themselves Harry simply disliked because of their insistence on beautiful melodies and harmonies. These he felt elided the power of the lone human voice moaning away somewhere on a crumbling levy. This image he felt was the soul of the blues, which in turn was the basis of rock music. The Beatles, he felt, had nothing to do with real rock and roll. He saw them as corrupters of fifties-era music. He thought they were half as good as The Platters.

Once the news of Lennon's death penetrated between a fold of the corporate media's notoriously thick hide, Harry recalled a twenty-four Beatles set had been the order of the day, broadcast from every single station simultaneously.

"Back then the radio was all we had," he said to that mysterious person he was talking to replete with a noose around his neck and shoe polish on his face. It's Emmett Till! Back for a second round of ogling the derrieres of white women! This time likely there would be a more tolerant reaction from on-lookers, one would assume. Cain thought he wouldn't get so much as a cold stare from his ogling. He

thought maybe he would get a fair amount of phone numbers, too.

He had a portable earphone radio that because of the Beatles barrage he wound up smashing on a rock outside his house. For the longest while the radio wouldn't stop playing Lennon's music. And especially "Imagine." He thought he would have gone fucking nuts if he had heard it again. He thought it was the worst song ever written, actually. He didn't have the data to back it up, but he thought it was the worst song he had ever had to devote three minutes of his life to listening.

A hippie art teacher back in Homes' junior high used to play "Imagine" constantly. She thought it would inspire her charges to do great things. This could have been the source of Harry's hatred, actually. He must have heard it three hundred times before he was fourteen.

Part of his mission statement with Raising Cain (if only the one he kept to himself) was to create the sort of anti-hippie anthems that he fancied as Imagine's mirror image.

"If John Lennon rose from the dead, I would kill him all over again," Harry Cain told Emmett Till and accepted his high five as a payment. He had actually thought of an ancillary bit. He wanted to pour ketchup in the Breton cap to duplicate the entry wound the first bullet had made. This was not in poor taste within this crowd of limit-testers. Holmes had likely flown in most of them during the day. At worst, many of them would find the conceit overdone. Besides, if you wanted to make a batch of fake blood you used Caro corn syrup and red dye number two, not ketchup. So many other party goers had repeated the same shtick that Cain was grateful for showing restraint. He wanted to be the coolest of the cool and constantly sought to modulate his reactions. There had to be restraint shown in such situations, if only to indicate one's disdain for the scene. Here, he wanted to sport a costume that registered as effortlessly offensive. Almost like he truly did not know what he was doing. All these vampires

would like Harry Cain as a result. They would express admiration for his effortlessness.

Some of them he assumed had been working on their costumes all day. He wanted to make it clear to them that the essence of soulfulness was not giving a fuck about anything. So much so that one had to put oneself out when trying to express such emptiness to begin with.

Now, Harry: John Lennon was assassinated but his murder was clearly empty of political ramifications. At least not the sort of political ramifications Mud Holmes had in mind upon conceiving of the idea for the party originally.

"My corpse is better than your corpse," Emmett Till said to Harry and pulled distractingly at the noose fastened to his charcoal-colored neck. Speaking in a familiar voice to Cain through the layers of shoe polish enough for him to recognize that it was Mud Holmes addressing him on the other side of it! He had the details of his costume down to the kind of knot the Mississippi Klan had used when lynching poor Emmett from a two-hundred-year oak tree. To this day the tree stood un-commemorated in a field full of dandelions in the spring (and thistle in the summer, absent a proper bit of gardening applied repeatedly onto its topsoil). He was telling Harry wistfully what he thought a morally-centered person would actually want to hear regarding the production of the two corpses. He was just talking to talk. Really, he didn't believe a word of it. Just like everybody else in this manse, he understood that the senseless murder of a white rock star had far greater ramifications than the mere lynching of a fourteen-year-old shine. In an indirect way, this was the point Holmes was trying to make with this party. He was trying to demystify and properly contextualize ordinary acts of murder from so-called hate crimes. He didn't believe the black man suffered unduly, at least at the advent of the twenty-first century. He thought black people complained too much about so many things. He thought they needed to be shown what a real tragedy was like, such as the assassination of a

famous and (putatively) gifted artist. Oh, the world had been deprived of so many live performances of “Imagine” by its original artist at the funeral of every left-leaning pol that it was difficult either to forget or forgive. A great hole in the cultural landscape had opened that our collective grief could not fill completely. Whereas, with lowly Emmett Till, only Bob Dylan had written a single, forgettable song. The people voted with their hearts in such matters. One needn’t have been so jaded as to be amongst *Filth* magazine’s hangers-on to have thought this was the case. It wouldn’t have struck even outsiders as wrong that Lennon was being acclaimed as a martyr while Emmett Till was forgotten. People were like that. At least within this plantation’s confines, people didn’t see the value of righting a wrong. They took Holmes’ Till as merely another racial provocation. They couldn’t be bothered even to Google the name. They didn’t care why he was wearing a rope like it was an exotic necktie.

Not that Cain needed the excess attention that his costume would draw. Cobbled together as it was on such short notice, he genuinely didn’t give his choice much thought beyond that it would satisfy the requirement that he come dressed as something. After Holmes, the next few partygoers who had approached him thought he was making a grand statement about the integrity of music. That he was comparing himself (who was in the eyes of many still alive) favorably to John Lennon and his mediocre output post-Plastic Ono Band. In truth, it had crossed his mind. But only as he was standing on the manse’s doorstep. If he had brought a dinner jacket and found a pair of old horned rims he would have gone as Buddy Holly, himself executed by God. Buddy’s music Cain had always admired greatly. He would never think of goofing on him or his widowed bride. It would just never have crossed his mind to do so.

All through the funereal gloom of an estate that at least for this soiree was lighted only by candles, Harry would spend the next few hours attempting to separate individuals

from their disguises. Knowing most of these people only by reputation, he couldn't accurately guess who it was they were attempting to impersonate. These were all *Filth* magazine people, he assumed, flown in here earlier in the day by Holmes as part of the tax write-off scheme he had told him about yesterday. He would call it a corporate training exercise or something like that and receive a dispensation from the IRS because of it. Something like that, duplicitous and likely illegal. For Mud Holmes, the taboo nature of an act often seemed the entirety of its attraction. He was first to admit he wasn't a sociable person. He didn't enjoy the company of others so much as those few that cared for him believed that he should.

He liked the character of Emmett Till because of his social relevance (given their surroundings) and the obscurity of the reference to begin with. Other attendees weren't obviously putting themselves out so much when it came to the occasions' proper dress. Somewhere around there was a supply store that trafficked in used orange jumpsuits. At first inspection seventy percent of the crowd was dressed in these onesies replete with the prisoner number on their backs, rendered by means of spray paint and a stencil. Nine-character IDs and different stencil sizes per state was an impressive detail that Harry had picked up on right away. Maybe they had a bigger selection in the warehouse than could be imagined. Maybe this little-known Louisiana store could have counted on a steady supply of authentic looking jumpsuits from around the country.

Most of the condemned at this soiree were overweight. This Harry Cain found mildly surprising owing to the reputation of hipsters as skinny jean wearing vegans.

"I think I met you before," Cain said to Charles Davis, the four hundred twenty-two-pound serial killer and one-time habitué of Florida's penal system whose head had been torn entirely off by the force his girth had generated against an unyielding noose. Bald as an egg in this incarnation, Davis in

his orange jumpsuit held his head in one enormous hand and scampered about the old manse with an inch and a half of spinal column peeping out of the orange collar that had been weirdly and immaculately pressed for the occasion. The disembodied head had lively darting blue eyes and the illusion was that he was seeing through these rather than...lord knew how. When Harry began to speak to the head, the eyes cast upwards. This seemed an impressive feat of animatronic engineering. But, regardless, the effect was all too clever to behold without smirking. He thought maybe whoever this was should have gone for an altogether simpler effect. The head and body combo would be brought out for laughs for however many hours this affair was on-going. And then that would be it for all existence. He couldn't help seeing the whole effort as too much in service of too little. He thought the neck bone and jumpsuit combo would have been sufficient especially given the poorly lit surroundings in which they found themselves conversing. Except for the open eyes, much of the head's details was lost in shadow. This obfuscation seemed more suggestive of decapitation than the lurid artifact itself. He thought he would get a drink and explain it to this attendee forthwith. He had nothing better to do just then but bust people's balls. He wasn't looking to network, lord knew. Quite literally, he didn't know the context in which the word was being used.

In fact, he had never met Davis himself but he had met his executioner, Billy Shriver, back in the Andrew Jackson Correctional Facility. The hint of recognition sprung from the small photographed image taped to the Sargent's wall that had not come up in the brief conversation between them. Charles Davis was there in his cell flashing the *maloik* into the camera. Practicing Satanist was he in his last days hoping to be reborn. Up until the very moment of his hanging, he claimed to welcome death. He was as hardcore as they came, a killer of women and stray dogs. He wanted to have a posse of sex slaves and pets in the afterlife he said was why he had

Death Trip 146

done it. He said this with a smile always to negate the statement's sincerity. It was part of his dark mystique to abhor explanations for his evil. Likely he thought it made him even more anti-social. He was nobody's fucking guinea pig. He was resistant to all attempts at the realm of science to gain a toehold within his glacial intellect.

He had a poem he had wanted to recite seconds before the trapdoor gave way. Presently the Davis head was reciting it now complete with spittle-covered lips that quivered at a particularly delectable syllable:

*For the longest time/
They wanted to bend me over/
The sink/
I told 'em fuck you and evolved/
Now I will be in heaven/
A superior creature/
Grabbing niggers by the balls/
And the hairs of their nappy heads*

He was speaking these words like they were the most fundamental expression of Self possible whose recitation, once complete, would also complete Davis' purpose on earth and allow him to die peacefully as he might. Having been tipped off of by another guard, Billy Shriver had put an end to the recitation before it started by "accidentally" springing the trap door under Davis' feet a minute too early. Apologies to his stickler of a boss were in order afterwards, of course. There was a remarkable wet tearing sound several seconds in as the body dropped from the noose like a rotten piece of fruit. Well, that was something to see truly. For weeks on end afterwards it was all Billy felt charged to talk about. He thought of course it was all God-ordained. It was the Lord's way of telling you where Davis was being consigned to finally.

He talked about it in miraculous terms. He claimed ordinary science couldn't explain what happened after the trap door deployed.

Nothing could be further from the truth, of course. In the eyes of Florida's governing bodies, it was only science that required further consultation. Indeed, because of the Davis execution, a weight restriction had been instituted for the imposed sentence of hanging from the neck until dead. Now any fat boy over three hundred fifty pounds was put on a restricted calorie diet which included his last meal. A physicist from Florida A&M would have to be brought in to certify the process free of the possibility of decapitation. It was all *concordia discors* in other words, the decorous play of natural forces that was blind to its own being. A miracle would have occurred if the motherfucker in question had stopped mid-drop and floated away to the heavens with two middle fingers on display. Anything else but this unlikely occurrence should be considered banal as all life. Nothing to get excited over, certainly. If you wanted to go in search of God, you looked for him in the mind's dream landscape along with leprechauns, unicorns, and the famed Yeti of the Himalayas.

Never to be conceptualized as any sort of victim despite his rude end at the hands of the state, the remnants of Charles Davis became the objects of a great deal of sympathetic palaver.

"They're getting the wrong impression about all of this," Harry said affecting a Liverpuddlian brogue to his erstwhile photographer Bones, gathering dust in a corner. He was speaking about the seeming lack of moral perspective that attendees were evincing toward many of the monsters they were portraying. They all seemed perfectly attuned to death row inmates as victims, but hardly the victimizers they objectively were as well. A few, such as the eyeless Joe Arridy standing by an unlit candelabra, were truly innocent men.

Most were in possession of this dual nature that made identifying with them imaginatively difficult and morally abhorrent. They all had their excuses ready and some, like a slouching John Wayne Gacy Jr. over by the bar, were utterly

insistent about their innocence, even after death. In Harry's view they, the portrayers of such men, needed to hone in on the despicable nature of most death row inmates and save the sympathy for the long-suffering baby seals of the Arctic.

"How many dead bodies with that geezer anyway," Cain said, pointing to a slouching Gacy. Looked just like the famed Illinois serial killer just before his death. Which would have made whoever it was playing him decades older than *Filth* magazine's staff assumed average age of around twenty-four. Maybe he was somebody's dad who had tagged along for the ride. Maybe he was the publication's outside general counsel who was doing this as a laugh. He had the same petrified bags under his eyes and the four-day growth over jowls JWG sported during his last interviews in downstate Illinois. Maybe he was a professional JWG impersonator, hired by Mud on the suspicion that the party would be Dullsville without him. There were worse ways to make a living, you'd have to assume, though few sprang to mind just then. Even with the bowl of nitrous oxide canisters flown in for the occasion against FAA rules, the party had a strictly downcast air. The actual absence of electric-based light in this manse wasn't helping matters hardly. Holmes thought eventually folks would have gotten sick about discussing how somebody died and split for the roadhouse they had all passed on the way in. Looked like a lively scene there whoever was playing. Mud Holmes wasn't one of the world's deep thinkers. He might have always suspected that this party was a bad idea.

He had wanted to hype Harry's articles and bring in some local media salivaters to create a collateral buzz around the series. But absent of the filter of Cain's lively mind, the grim reality of state-actuated murder as well as the slightly less grim reality of ex-officio murder was weighing heavy on party participants. Nobody was that jaded (just yet) to look at insect-eyed JWG standing by himself in the room's center and not recoil slightly. Apart from the hype it brought to the Death Trip series, the intent was to boost the coolness factor of

the attendees through the roof. So many attendees were children of the wealthy who had never so much as been issued a traffic citation. They would be free to mock the wretched of the earth even as they were sentimentalizing them. There was a black river of misery lapping at the levy of their indifference. And Holmes thought this test was needed if the partygoers could declare themselves above it all with brio. He thought they needed to demonstrate their contempt for the black man by mocking their martyrs. Upon entering, he had been disappointed to behold at most two others dressed in blackface. He thought the number was bound to be exponentially greater than this. He thought about including a coupon for shoe polish with the e-vite. He thought it would make him a certain legend amongst that class of vampiric New Yorker that saw fit to challenge the political correctness of the age.

According to Bones, however, there was a cosmic double-cross on going at this bash. As so many of these participants were the real McCoy and not so many hipster pranksters trying their best to offend.

"Look at that face a moment, bud, will you," Bones said to Harry gesturing at slouchy JWG. "Does that seem like the face of a motherfucking gopher to you? Somebody who makes his living getting coffee for others?"

He seemed in fact the spitting image of JWG. But this in itself proved nothing but Cain's relative ignorance about such matters. Or the diligence of the actor who was in the middle of playing him.

No, he was real anyway Bones said regardless of all the plausible excuses to be raised that he wasn't. Which implied that either both of them or the man upstairs had gone bat shit crazy and was presently broadcasting his dysfunction unto the earth's four corners. Bones was convinced, for example, that Gacy had an intention to kill somebody here tonight just as a demonstration. He was convinced, furthermore, that it would be one of them.

"Don't turn your back on that scum, bud, whatever you do," Bones said to Cain. And then as he wanted he quickly vanished into the scenery Cheshire-style. This time at the very least he had an excuse. He was scared for his own life supposedly given present company. Likely this was an exaggeration on his part, surely. As even Gacy himself seemed well behaved. On his right temple there was an egg-sized welt he kept touching, resultant from an unexpected collision with a guard's baton at the hour of his death. Whoever it was who clubbed him had a cousin who had a cousin who had succumbed to the zaftig lunatic's charms one day and entered into his famous soundproofed garage alone. Apparently, the Gacy execution was closed to the media. If they knew the guard's family history, they might not have objected at all to the clubbing.

Be that as it may, Gacy was, at least that version of him that God had warranted, no more.

"I believe you've gotten stupider as you've aged," Harry said unto the vanished physical structure of Bones and made for the open bar. He didn't care, not so much anyway whether this JWG was the JWG who had used the Des Plaines River in suburban Chicago as an abattoir. It didn't strike him as all that important whether this was so. If you believed (as Cain did) that reality was mere circumstance, an ugly dog pile of facts basically, then there was no such thing as John Wayne Gacy anyway. No such thing as illusion or reality. But only certain iterations of existence that were more detailed than others. He honestly thought Bones needed to shut his pie hole if he wasn't going to offer any proof for his contentions. He was merely being contentious with Harry for his own reasons. Harry wasn't appreciative of the behavior even slightly. To him the information provided was of no use. It was reported merely to fuck with people. It was stated entirely in an attempt to call attention to himself and away from whatever was the case now.

For Harry Cain, that which was the case now was that which served to elevate him above this veil of tears.

"I've got a lot of reasons to get blotto immediately that I'm keeping to myself," Harry said to a girl with bright orange hair toting around a blood-stained ax. Bereft of a proper clean glass, he was taking slugs of Maker's Mark through the bottle. Very rock-n-roll one would have thought (if one was sober enough to surmise for oneself what he was doing). He thought himself entitled to get hammered based on all that he had been through over the past few weeks. He felt himself put upon by circumstance suddenly. Didn't know all the sights and sounds of the tour would register with him so profoundly even as he strove to commercialize his reactions for the greater gain of *Filth*.

Unaccustomed as he was to working for anybody but himself, Harry was recoiling from the grind of capitalism. He felt it was a gross impingement on his freedom to be forced into such-and-such a place at such and such a time. He wanted to work only when he felt like it. But the trip had already been planned out in advance. He didn't have a say when the executions would take place. In his current role, he was a humble reporter merely.

It had all come down to this sad state of affairs, not through any error of his own or even mendacious action of another but through the whole septic drip of time.

"There's nothing you can do about any of it," he said to this girl, Lizzie B., "except take it and wait to be removed from the world for good. That's the most depressing thing; the fact that you can't do anything about it from the start. It's just simply the way it is," he said to her, "the idea that you've been fucked in advance by whatever it is. You can be on your best game for as long as you want and you're still fucked in advance by the world. It don't stop for nobody ever. It's just a machine, society. And the nature it sits in as well. You're out of the box when you're within its presence, disconnected from the notion that you have something on the world. When

you're a starving artist, this is your sole comforting thought, that you have something over on your oppressors. Once in the real world that illusion is vanished for good. You're at the mercy of so much machinery that all you can think about is let's get it over with. But even with this you have not much of a say in the matter. You're helpless and you know you are helpless. You're like one of these death row inmates who sit there waiting for the end to come."

Talking in between whiskey pulls had usually been easy enough for Cain during his salad days. Presently he was finding that he needed to halt either one practice or the other to let both move forward in a coordinated way. Here was another anecdotal instance of the universal unfairness of life that would have made compelling testimony if he had thought to use it as such. He was depressed suddenly and wallowing in the anxiety that his new lifestyle was sure to cause somebody like him who took things perhaps too seriously. He wanted it all to be over quickly. He wanted the machine to permanently jam due to the blockage of his own body in the gears.

He had an idea of how it might go past the terrifying walk from the cell and the strapping in and the fake religiosity of the moment that the state was required to slather on like so much Lysol on a patch of rot to keep the baseness at arm's length.

"Needs to be something really grand, like it's really at an end," he said to Lizzie and offered her a pull of Maker's Mark. He had been aware that for the past few minutes he had been talking far too much for his own self-image as a taciturn outsider to be in play any longer. Ever since arriving at the party, he had imagined his body placed into various tortuous situations that would result in his personal extinction. It was always in a giant public stage and it was always an act of spectacular overkill relative to the small amount of work performed. He thought the show was being put on for the

benefit of others solely. He was simply the opening course, like one of several hundred virgins at an Incan sacrifice.

Nevertheless, he would be sacrificed regardless because some standard issue death in a nursing home after four score empty years was not his fate. Couldn't be in that he simply wouldn't allow it to happen. He could take matters into his own hands anytime he wished. He likely would when the moment called for it.

Of late, he had consciously abandoned any squeamishness he possessed about entering the Big Sleep prematurely. His death trip had inured him to such matters presently. Framed in a suitable way, he was looking forward to the end. He thought he deserved to be transported to the lip of an active volcano and thrown in. He wanted to bond with nature in the most extreme way. He thought he deserved it after all as recompense for an entire servile existence. His music career had not taken off, but his death surely would gain admirers for decades. He would be known for the dignified manner of his end. He would teach the waking world not to be afraid of dying. He would have a smile on his face as they threw him in.

The song in his heart rising to articulation would be an old Broadway standard likely, whose first stanza was able to be uttered quickly enough just before the lava flow was encountered:

*You're just too marvelous, too marvelous for words/
Like "glorious", "glamorous" and that old standby "amorous"/
It's all too wonderful, I'll never find the words/
That say enough, tell enough, I mean they just aren't swell enough*

Harry Cain said to Lizzie Borden, "I'm fucked royally anyway. If you ask me, the end can't come soon enough."

She asked him to create a thought poem in her honor just before he committed himself unto the earth.

"Fat chance sister," Harry told her then dropped the empty whiskey bottle down onto the manse's creaky wooden floor. Damp with rot as it was, the bottle didn't shatter but merely bounced dully against a particularly blackish board. It soon began to drip the meager remainder of its contents into a floorboard crack that had been filled with tar in the 1970s as a stopgap attempt at preservation. The lack of electric light in the room was disguising the dilapidated state of the plantation house. It had been gently sinking into the earth ever since the NAACP had funding cut off decades back on the grounds of the plantation being a meeting place for the Louisiana Klan. They had wanted to take a wrecking ball to this place, but this was beyond their legal purview. No public monies had been approved for its renewal in decades. And the local goobers who worshipped this plantation as a shrine were notoriously unwilling to tithe despite what would happen as a result.

He thought this place as vulgar as any pluralistic society could tolerate. He thought any sort irony attached to its existence profoundly misplaced and false.

"Probably back then there were dandies walking around with this weird expression on their faces denying the facts in front of them," Cain said to Lizzie Borden (though she had long since strayed from his side). "They would make these jokes to each other. We are keeping our fellow humans as cattle. Couldn't stop laughing about it actually. To them only a fool would look on the present situation and not see it for what it was. They were zoo keepers merely, humane up to a fault. It was always that way and always would be that way, anon."

Hard to say if there was ever any falling of scales from eyes for any of these wags. Likely the War between the States had claimed most of them by now. Those who survived the cataclysm were at pains to deny their present situation. The South would rise again and all that nonsense. But it had never rose to begin with above where the mantle of bones of an

enslaved race had placed it. Short of reinstituting slavery, what sort of legitimate back-to-the-future scenario could there be for this region? The white folks were ignorant as animals down here, Cain thought, despite all evidence to the contrary. Finally, the worship of a collective past was the surest sign of a culture in decline. They were inhabiting a fantasy that negated the possibility of social progress. They were constantly inventing dark fantasies of control from above. There were commies, nigger-lovers, Jews around every corner. So much so it was impossible to say how the poor white southerner had survived as long as he had.

The rich northerners of Williamsburg and places immediately to the south and west were surviving nicely as ever at present, albeit in circumstances far more rancid than they were used to. Just then.

"Doesn't feel like a big deal to me," one of their number said to Harry from outside the window his nose had been pressed up to. Harry had just mounted the stone dais on which a pillory had been placed, product of the year just before the Civil War started. Presently he had his hands and feet bound and he was wondering about what the big deal was. Didn't hurt nearly as much as he had supposed it would. In fact, he was rather comfortable now, staring out into firefly hordes beyond.

The purpose of this pillory was merely to secure the body prior to it being bullwhipped repeatedly.

"Lay the nigger low," Mud Holmes cried and looked around for a bullwhip to use on this poor sap who had pilloried himself. Didn't know what he was getting himself in for apparently, this gent. He must have been a *Filth* intern as opposed to a *Filth* lifer. *Filth* lifers knew enough to keep their guard up at all times. Especially when there was booze involved in the proceedings and when various acts of murder and sodomy were being discussed. Within such an environment, every bit of weakness was exposed. *Filth* lifers

viewed weakness as an unforgiveable sin and sought to eradicate those in possession of it as they went.

If there actually had been a bullwhip lying around somewhere, Mud would have been quick to use it on the pilloried intern's back in careful imitation of the old slave masters.

"Be slow to anger but quick to forgive," John Wayne Gacy said to Harry Cain having observed the scene himself for the suitable amount of time that he felt it was reasonable to comment about it. "It's the motto I live by every day," he said. "Don't make a big spectacle of your own unhappiness. You're not better than anyone just because you have suffered unduly."

Possessor of a surprisingly high-pitched voice, JWG was made to seem somehow more earnest than the situation hinted at. JWG had a pair of trick handcuffs that he liked to show off to the neighborhood kids. Every now and then he would switch the trick handcuffs for real ones. He enjoyed very much the look on so many of their faces when they discovered they could not escape from them. He had a garage that he had soundproofed so completely that the sound of a jackhammer could not escape from its precincts. He had a sense of himself as a sick, haunted person. This by itself did not make him want to stop.

"Where ya headed to after this," he asked Harry then out his hand on his shoulder. Not speaking as a faithful friend but just a friendly acquaintance. JWG knew exactly where Harry was headed to all along. He had been there many times himself.

He had been there so often they had named the public swimming pool after him.

Chapter Five: June 29, 2003

(Brownsville, Texas)

Driving into Brownsville off I-69, a heat mirage was encountered in the shape of a degraded Artemis. This entity was standing pigeon-toed and bare-torsoed on one weedy road shoulder. She seemed in need of help.

"You're not seeing things the way they truly are," Artemis, who was the Greek Goddess of the hunt, told Harry Cain once he stopped to take a gander at her. She was fingering a mastectomy scar as he did. "You're not asleep but you're not awake either," she told him. "In reality, you're somewhere in between."

To Harry this was a self-evident assertion. He didn't need reminding that he was off his rocker. Lunacy presented itself to him moment to moment as to others constantly like the blast furnace atmosphere of south Texas. Ninety-two in the shade now, to quote a book title. He would be happy finally when it was all over. Life, that is. If only so he could stop sweating. He assumed death was always pre-configured to sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit. He assumed there was no thermostat adjustment needed at all.

Artemis' left breast had been cut off, she reported, in an attempt to halt her cancer's spread.

"Originally, they didn't know how much to cut," she said to him of her team of oncologists at Minnesota's renowned

Death Trip 158

Mayo Clinic. "They didn't know if they should go for a radical mastectomy or something less invasive. They were talking about cutting half the muscle off one side of me at one point," she said turning towards him slightly. "They were talking about leaving me in a state so that I couldn't even raise my bow to fell a stag."

She didn't know, couldn't say at this moment, whether the surgical intervention was effective. Taking chemo for the last few months, she was almost at the end of a cycle. She thought perhaps several more surgeries were in order for her down the road. She thought perhaps she was fucked by Dame Fortuna to the point that it made no sense to even try and fight back anymore.

She had a gravesite picked out all for herself in the Elysian Fields beneath a stunted rose bush. Its shade never ventured from four o'clock regardless of the position of the sun overhead. She had the funeral invitees all picked out. She had an ancient paean that she had directed her mourners to sing just as her body was being lowered into the all-forgiving ground:

*How shall the burial rite be read?
The solemn song be sung?
The requiem for the loveliest dead,
That ever died so young?*

*Her friends are gazing on her,
And on her gaudy bier,
And weep! - oh! to dishonor
Dead beauty with a tear!*

*They loved her for her wealth -
And they hated her for her pride -
But she grew in feeble health,
And they love her - that she died.*

"I'd like to take all these cunts out one at a time," Artemis told Harry of her admirers. She pointed them to the quiver pressed against the clammy skin in her back. "I'd like to walk them into an alley and put an arrow in the side of their necks."

Forgotten by the collective culture completely, Artemis was experiencing abandonment issues at an epic level. Now only Harry Cain, filthy in the bosom of his derangement, could bear witness to her decline. He was not by first nature an empathetic soul. But he would have to suffice.

All the old gods, she said, those visions of ancient cultures, were in their way weak as kittens and more worthy of contempt than respect.

"They don't understand why they've been forgotten," Artemis said to Harry and traced the line of her surgery scar with her left index finger. She told him that she always considered themselves worthy of veneration simply because they had been venerated by so many for so long. Presently, they were all in a fine mess just like her. She didn't understand what penance was required of them to improve their lot. There were strange prayers in the new way of worshipping, recantations that were required of them in order to be reclaimed into the good graces of men. The Old Gods needed to reform themselves in some way fundamental way. They needed to make it clear to others that they were not the wretches that they once were advertised to be, imperious and indifferent to the suffering of mortals. If only to save themselves, they were willing to meet humanity on more or less equal footing. They thought of themselves as victims. They were too tired to lodge an official complaint with some abstract authority or to fight back in earnest, but an overpowering implacability greeted the span of their efforts. They wanted an end to the meaninglessness that ignominy imposed. They wanted to be free of the burden of the present mode of living that had proved unbearable to their refined sensibilities, honed by having received so much worship from below forever.

All the old dead Gods, Artemis said, the entirety of their corpses, would stretch no higher than the belly of a worm in relation to the ground.

"The reason for this is we are so small in comparison to real people when surmised in a reasonable light," she told Harry. For the longest time he had been wondering if that hulking series of structures in the far southern distance was *ciudad Brownsville*, or one more heat borne illusion to have to migrate around when the time came to do so. He thought at this stage he had best assumed all visions as false visions until directly dissuaded by his body. The sun, for example, Cain knew as real if only because it was causing such physical distress within him. Perhaps this Goddess Artemis at some point would aim an arrow at him to prove a point and reveal herself as false. The arrow would simply pass through him like so many sub-atomic particles fleeing the Milky Way. He thought in such a circumstance the relief would only be transitory. Eventually somebody's arrowhead would prove real. At which point he would die in earnest in the same way he had only imagined himself as doing four or five times since this death trip had been undertaken.

Given that the Old Gods were the universe's pillars, this expressed truth about their present vulnerability was deeply hurtful to Artemis even as, lo and behold, its reality became more incontestable by the moment.

"I was on the operating table being made fun of by the same people who were supposed to save me," Artemis said to Harry and shed a single tear for herself. Upon hitting the ground, the tear crystallized and broke into twenty parts. One of these crystals had made into the folds of Harry's sneaker. He was quite likely meant to pick it out. It was a gift of a sort, he figured. He was being programmed to say thank you to Artemis for it. He was trying to be conned into saying this was what he wanted all along.

What you could do with such an object, lord knew. Other than wear it around decoratively and make believe it was an

object of beauty. Rather than some remnant of an alien physical process that would have been considered disgusting by most if they were aware of its details.

When Harry returned to the drop-top caddie that they had been tooling around Texas in for the past few days, he was asked a rapid-fire series of questions by his photographer, Bones. These were designed to elicit a series of nonsensical responses from him. He had no purchase on the truth. Not anymore. He had given up on the concept entirely.

"Who were you talking to just then," he wanted to know of Harry. "You had stopped to take a piss, I thought. But who were you talking to once your piss stopped flowing?"

Appearing to be passed out in the passenger's seat, Bones in fact had been keeping on a watchful eye on Cain all the while. He didn't trust Harry and he had told him this in no uncertain terms even before the Caddy was procured. Bones thought Harry had been acting weird of late ever since witnessing the last execution in Louisiana. He said all the hallucinogenic substances Harry had been imbibing had been taking its toll on him. He wasn't cut out apparently to be a dispassionate observer of man's inhumanity to man. He said he needed to get his shit together and man up before they hit the last prison on the tour.

At the state pen in Metamere, the method of execution had been lethal injection via a three-drug combination of sodium thiopental, pancuronium bromide, and potassium chloride administered through a clear IV drip whose activation those in the witness chamber had been alerted to in advance of the condemned being strapped onto a t-shaped table at the room's center.

"You shouldn't have volunteered that shit anyway on your own," Bones said to Harry recalling for him the low grumbling he had made just prior to the high squeals of protest as the plastic valve at the top of each drip was turned two hundred seventy degrees clockwise to allow for a proper flow. It was obvious, even from the relative distance that they

were observing it from, that one of the valves was out of order. It was not yielding the right amount of poison into the condemned's system. It was an oversight that might well have been seen a failure on the part of the executioners. Or maybe something less legally damning.

Of the three drugs, only one, the potassium chloride, was needed to take life. The other two were being administered as a balm for the consciences of the witnesses. The sodium thiopental was a tranquilizer whose purpose was to put the condemned into a coma and the pancuronium bromide was a paralytic designed to stop the condemned from breaking a bone once the potassium chloride induced cardiac arrest and the body set itself to an involuntary thrash mode for the minute it was able.

Likely what had happened was the executioner had taken the bribe offered by various aggrieved family members to damage the valve controlling the tranquilizer in order to exact some manner of Old Testament-style revenge.

"It was none of your goddamned business anyway what they did or didn't do," Bones said to Harry with his disgust unabated even after three days had past. Having cornered him in a shared motel room back in Metamere, this was where Bones had threatened to leave Harry immediately if he ever saw him do something of the sort again. He felt a profound sense of obligation toward his journalistic craft. He felt the need to be as objective as possible in his dealings with his subject matter despite whatever direction one's moral compass was pointed at just then.

Morality after all was for losers, Bones noted, and quoted Harry Cain himself on this point on several occasions. Cain had in his younger days been an aficionado of Friedrich Nietzsche. He had gone so far as to have a tattoo of his favorite Nietzschean epigram imprinted across his chest:

If thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee

Heavy duty stuff, to be sure. Bones himself was a functional illiterate. He had never heard of Nietzsche, much less read him. On the other hand, he had an unfaltering sense of how to operate in a godless world that seemed to correspond remarkably well with the Nietzschean ideal. He was a natural at amorality and could point out a recidivist at a thousand yards. Cain, despite his druggy avowals otherwise in interviews and song, was very much a fearful soul. Upon the Alien Christ's return, he would likely be one of the first to beg forgiveness from Him. He was afraid of dying deep down, as he was afraid of going to hell. He thought himself as somebody caught on the horns of a dilemma. He wanted to help men just like all the other pussies. He couldn't merely bear witness dispassionately. He couldn't tell the truth unadulterated absent of the corrupting filter of God-fear, hatred of the Other, and the preachy sentimentality that ninety eight percent of the culture was filtered through, despite all the protestations amongst the media elite that this was not taking place.

To live is to suffer. To survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.

The above, according to Harry, was the Nietzschean epigram earmarked for his forehead tattoo that never materialized despite his constant threats to his band mates and a psychotherapist or two that it would be accomplished forthwith.

"Don't you believe," Harry said to Bones belatedly having discovered that he had migrated to the drop top's back seat (even though he had believed himself in the midst of driving), "that corruption of every sort must be identified and rooted out? If only to be able go on?"

Bones answered the question by flicking a lit cigarette in Cain's direction.

"I think you need to experience what life is like from every angle possible," Bones said to him after a while. "The universe is in the midst of providing life lessons. But with you the lessons are not taking," he said. "You might as well have stayed at home and wrote your stories from your own faulty imagination. You don't seem to be having a very good time with objective reality," Bones said. "We took that peyote you and I outside of Houston. But you don't seem intent on convening with the animal spirits the drug created for you. No, with you it's a straight march over to the next story. And from there I suppose you'll find one more place to hole up for a while before the end comes. But you'll die never admitting to the truth of what you've been through the past few weeks," he said to Harry. "The evidence is all right there waiting your inspection," he said. "There's an obvious conclusion about all this to be reached. You'll die, I'm guessing, before you're able to tell yourself what it is."

Something profoundly stronger than peyote in fact had made its way to Harry's bloodstream outside of Houston, courtesy John Wayne Gacy in Metamere. He had these homemade tablets he wanted Harry to try. He wanted Harry to recommend them to his readers if he felt compelled to do so at some future moment.

"Fratrocycle he called it," Cain had said to Bones just crossing the Texas state line the day before. "He said he made it from the ground-up testicles of all the dead boys in his attic," Harry said. "He said he would cut their nuts off with an x-acto blade. Then he would create a broth and ferment his secret recipe. He claimed himself a real-life sorcerer and heir to Aleister Crowley. This was what he was in it for all along, he said, not the thrill of murder. He claimed to have discovered the secret for the potion during a demonic vision. He was twenty-three at the time, something like that. He said he knew himself at this point as a practitioner for life of the dark arts. Even though he did not yet know a single incantation."

Gobbling JWG's entire supply with the help of an available lager, Harry Cain had waited for either death or transfiguration to come upon him right then.

"It doesn't work like that exactly," Gacy told him and described for Harry Cain his pills' exact impact in minute detail.

"It doesn't fuck-up the inside of your mind even a little but something else," he said to Bones as the car was put in motion. Inexplicably it was put in motion as Harry was still – to the best of his knowledge – in the back seat. He didn't know the how of it but was well versed in the why of it. It was the Fratricyclene at work, rearranging and reclaiming the universe into something significantly different than what it had been before. It didn't work on the perceiver but rather on the objects of his or her perceptions. It distorted the world and left the brain more or less intact to bear witness to a funhouse world stripped of the pretensions of perfection that a theologian might have applied to its previous shape. It moved on its own accord after a single person had imbibed, impelled not by the demiurge's hand but by chaos' internal, eternal rhythm. Everyone saw it as such, not merely the drug's user. Powerful stuff, you'd have to say, especially if there were those using it in great quantities. When this happened, true Pandemonium would be brought to earth. A mostly charmless existence was scheduled for those who could survive the transition. The dead would be revived and recall their travails in languages so rough and foreign it would sound to the uninitiated like a prolonged scream. And then they would die again and be forced into silence upon their second resurrection simply as a means of punishing those who had been spoken to fluently about matters they'd be counseled to keep silent over while dead.

Believe it or not, Harry said, the mad visions that would afflict the individual at this point were indistinguishable from the ordinary perceptions of a changed world. So, he had conceived of objective reality in the Blakean sense only. This

was an ordinary negotiation between what was real and what had been perceived. And when the negotiation broke down, dreams infected waking life ceaselessly until distinguishing between seeing and dreaming became impossible. To a dark sorcerer like JWG, this was the state that must be reached at all costs. Gacy told Harry he had been using Fratricyclene ceaselessly for years. Presently his spirit had migrated to Louisiana in search of acolytes. He felt the desire in some measure to pass his secrets on. He was eternal but decaying. He was greatness personified and desired an audience to bear witness to his brilliance before the world grew too occluded for any light to shine through it.

"You think I'm crazy. But you'll wait and see that I'm right about so many things," he said to Bones. If Bones had been put off by the kaleidoscopic shifting of the world about him, he was not letting on at all. Nihilistic to the point of bearing false witness reflexively, he was likely the wrong person to have an in-depth conversation with about the nature of reality. He saw the unmooring of reality from its dull gray underpinnings as a completely insignificant occurrence. If he would ever admit at all it was taking place. Because according to him neither life nor one's testimony concerning its cruelties was subject to any sort of higher consideration. Apart from the consideration that reality was and always would be unknowable. Real men of substance were contemptuous of what was. And they were willfully ignorant of what always would be. It simply didn't or shouldn't concern them in the fevered way that Harry was testifying that it had for him personally. They could take or leave whatever the world threw at them. And this included their own divine madness. Bones thought madness and sanity were empty terms. Ultimately, they were used interchangeably by people too weak to simply express the obvious truth that the world was impossible to comprehend through reason alone. Men of limited knowledge expressed this truth with their dicks or more often with their fists. Self-

evident stuff as far as he was concerned. But for the time being he let Harry jabber on unbidden regardless.

If the world was truly changing around them, a perceptive test could be conducted to demonstrate the effect conclusively. This would alleviate any need Cain had to point the effect out to all those in his immediate vicinity who seemed uncomfortable with what was taking place.

"Trap a mouse in a Styrofoam cup," Bones said. "And on the outside of this cup write *Here's a Mouse* with a red pen. You write the same thing with the same pen on a piece of paper and put it in your pocket. And then you wait to see if anything's changed. If the mouse inside becomes a geranium, let's say, you know you're onto something. But if it simply lays there and decomposes, then you know you're due for a check-up with a shrink. Then you can begin to suspect that everything you've begun to consider so much over the past few days is delusional. You're sick and you know you're sick. You have this dead mouse to prove it. You can put a needle and string set through one of its eyes. You can wear it around your neck until the stink becomes too great for polite company. You'll remember polite company soon enough as soon as they point themselves out to you. You'll say, 'I never knew' and try to slink away into a corner. And in the end, it is my belief that your transition from prophet to madman is the only great change that you will ever experience again. People will start to look at you with these sharp glances. You will see their upper lips curling into a sneer when you are regarded by them. Women will run from your presence and that's how you know the change is complete."

Bones thought such a description was entirely accurate. Thus, he was somewhat surprised by the stream of invective his suggestions were greeted with. He didn't think he deserved to be insulted in such a straightforward manner. Furthermore, he didn't see Cain's cause being helped even slightly by such outbursts. He saw it rather as continued evidence of his decline. There was so much wrongly directed

passion there. He saw him as somebody unable to control himself. He needed to run off into the surrounding brush to get his head together maybe. The light of reason was proving too brilliant for him to countenance even for the few seconds society would demand him to do so. He needed to be off by himself rather, in a shadowy place not unlike the weedy road shoulder he had spent so much time in apparently (from Bones' limited perspective) talking to himself. When he came back to the car, he started perspiring profusely. Entering the Brownsville city limits, he was still perspiring and seemingly having a hard time keeping his eyes on the road. This was due to the sweat pouring into his eyes.

On several occasions, Bones suggested that he pull over and towel off. It was all happening too quickly. The event itself was an on-going cry for help.

When swerving into the path of an opposite bound semi, Bones had no intention of grabbing the wheel from him. Harry Cain had hooked up with the wrong travelling companion if he thought he would help him. But he was giving him credit now that he could control himself.

He should rather go ahead and do whatever he wanted, independent of Bones' participation.

"You have to realize our relationship as being one of mutual contempt," he said to Cain, trying his best to turn a phrase. He thought at some point he would abandon Harry to his own devices. He lacked respect for him and he assumed (if only because there was a certain symmetry involved in human affairs) Harry felt the same. At any rate, Bones' assignment had ended tomorrow upon the execution of the Rev. Rance Muto. He thought after mailing his latest rolls of film for developing, he would split from Harry's presence without so much as a goodbye kiss. He considered Harry merely an acquaintance whose presence was tolerated only out of a professional obligation to do so. The fact of the matter was they had even less in common than Bones had suspected at the trip's outset. Harry was somebody utterly devoid of the

ability to abandon his desperate past for his hopeless future. He was somebody for whom drastic change needed to be foisted. He couldn't make the great leap by himself.

Tomorrow or the next day he would tell him exactly what he thought of him (just as he had on several occasions already on this trip) and that would be it, as far as any personal connection between them went.

He had no intention of ingratiating himself to somebody he considered an inferior form of life. Let him rot in hell. And once there, may his demons get the best of him.

Bones was nobody's friend. He didn't see the point of being anybody's friend if one was only to receive friendship back as a recompense for one's efforts.

"There's something for the longest time I've been meaning to do," Harry told his travelling companion once parked in this six-story garage in the city's outskirts. He removed the arrow head from his shirt pocket that Artemis had given him the hour before in compensation for his promise to worship her in the formal way dictated by the Delphic priests of old.

He thrust forward with the arrowhead holding it between a thumb and forefinger and watched as it inserted itself into his photographer's left eye. "There you go," he said to him. "Now you see the world as I do."

Harry walked around the car and held the passenger side door open for Bones. "Watch your feet, motherfucker," he said to Bones as he was pulling out of the space.

Over the past few seconds, Bones' motor skills had deteriorated greatly. The arrowhead was sticking out his bleeding eyeball like some sort of rotten log in a patch of swamp.

To Harry, its presence was weirdly apropos. Like it served some sort of biological function. Lodged there at least an inch deep, it would likely require surgical intervention to remove. It would test the son-of-a-bitch's patience surely walking around with it in that way. For even somebody like Bones, pain was a God to whom offerings must be made

constantly. Eventually he would have to go in and admit to a medical professional that he had a problem.

But by the time that happened, Cain would be somewhere and something else entirely. And thus beyond any sort of prosecution administered by an official who couldn't know that Bones had it coming.

"They would see the effect and not the cause," he said to himself while wheeling the Caddy around a particularly dilapidated section of Brownsville. Beyond it lay a foreign land peopled with half-friendly natives who would decline to recognize any shared humanity with Harry if and when they were begged to do so. Perhaps this was as it should be. Most likely, it would merely be another example of why fundamentally Cain was as fucked up as he was. He had been in more scrapes with people over the years for no reason whatsoever than he could properly recall. Perhaps when it finally happened, this would be yet another instance of why nearing his life's midpoint he had chosen to live alone. He constantly thought himself lucky to come home at night to a darkened trailer absent the accusatory glances of somebody else. He thought if most people experienced what he experienced, they would think so, too.

Likely, Bones, being the stoic that he was, wouldn't play up his injuries so much. But whatever shit heel D.A./Sherriff combo they had down here would come after Cain regardless. They couldn't abide such a wanton violation of the law as this arrowhead in the eye would undoubtedly represent to them, absent an explanatory narrative. They felt the need to preserve order in such a rigid way as to discourage the creation of disorder. This at any rate was the narrative they were telling themselves routinely. They told themselves this if only for the peace of mind they needed to act against a perceived aggressor. They needed to be able to lay their heads on a pillow and be convinced of their own potency. They thought of themselves as members of the Thin Blue Line, reigning in chaos. But chaos was by its nature spontaneously

occurring and impossible to isolate. They thought of themselves as heroes in this regard, nevertheless. They didn't rationalize their objective failure with any sort of poorly conceived notion of what they were fighting. They would see something like Bones' damaged eye as evidence for the need for a renewed effort, not evidence of personal incompetence. They would go forward with Harry's prosecution at all costs. Their self-esteem was intimately connected to the effort.

The protest over the Second Gulf War and its enabling politics was on-going in the city's outskirts by the time Harry had found a space to park nearby.

"I'm thinking I found a soft place to land," Harry said to protest attendee Justin Then (pronounced *ten*) to Harry when seeing Harry leaning against the Cadillac's hood. He was trying to sop up Bones' blood in an inconspicuous manner. He was using the cloth against his hip as a shammie moving in concentric circles.

Last thing he needed really was to be given the what-for by some predatory cop working crowd control. Most necessarily, this was because he didn't have an explanation for why the blood was even there. Absent of cuts on his own body, he didn't think he had a real excuse for the fluid's placement on the Caddy's door.

Some of it was spilling over to the side upholstery. At least in his present state of mind, he couldn't ad lib ably enough if he was confronted about it. He thought something along the lines of claiming he had hit a peccary. He didn't know if there were peccaries around Brownsville. They would call his bluff and he would have no answer for it. He would have to admit to his misdeed at that point and face the consequences. Which was something he had not planned on doing today.

He would act as nonchalantly and affably as he might up until the point that Justin would ask him how come all the blood. At which point Harry would look at Justin and reach for another arrowhead.

Harry thought people needed to be smarter than that considerably. They needed to be able to detect the violence inherent in everyday life present in every social transaction and navigate around it. They needed to not be surprised about the sudden appearance of artifacts related to violence into the immediate scene as if they were so out of place as to be worth commenting over constantly.

Somehow Justin Then restrained himself from such patter. Instead he started talking about the Caddie's exquisite shape and details, a kind of nostalgia engine that provided an easeful aura about it regardless of where it roamed. Americans missed the 1950s regardless of what their political orientation would tell them about the wisdom of such feelings. The land whale of days gone by was a creature that could only be produced by a society with an extreme amount of confidence about its future. Nowadays, Detroit was in the midst of an extended existential crisis. They were lucky to still manufacture cars at all. Nobody in their right mind would think of either making or buying a vehicle along the lines of the Eldorado today.

Goddamn thing had steel plates in the outside of its carriage to provide a smidgen more protection for the driver. It had a five-foot-long steering column that terminated in a series of gyroscopes in order to reposition the wheel exactly once the car's turning motion was complete.

"I'll let you have it for twenty grand," Harry said to Justin. He was an engineering student at UT-Brownsville. He had come out here in the desire to support whoever would be talking about the stopping of the War. He had been wandering around the perimeter with his hands in his short's pockets waiting for the rally to start.

Code Pink had lately made an appearance in a place that they considered hostile territory. They were intent on confronting whatever representative of the state had made an appearance before them on this sweltering day. Too many outsiders here from either Austin or parts north to give Justin

a sense of belonging. An orderly demonstration would go forward regardless. But there were clearly audience members who were less than desirous of the outcome.

There was an effigy of George W. Bush that they had intended to burn on stage. American flags had been brought in by Austin-ites to be desecrated at some point. Such symbolism didn't sit well with Justin Then. He was, above all, a patriotic guy. Being on the same side with such scum made him question his opposition to the Middle East War.

Justin's brother had gone Over There and gotten his leg blown off by one of the improvised devices the insurgency was using against American troops in Iraq. He was all for a robust response to the 9/11 atrocities, but he didn't see the point of an Iraq invasion. Nobody had demonstrated the link between Saddam Hussein's regime and the Al Qaeda organization that had perpetrated the crime originally. At least to Justin, nobody had made the connection between the ongoing war in Afghanistan and the new war in Iraq.

He wanted to put a stop to it like so many people his age. Or at the very least to make clear his wishes in a public way. The problem he was having was that this demonstration went far beyond its advertised purpose of war cessation. People were out here carrying placards dedicated to Mother Earth, to the right of gays to marry, to the right to smoke marijuana legally, and to the sovereign rights of the Palestinians in their unceasing battle against the Pigs of Zion. Hard to say which of these held greater priority for them because they were loath to rank. As to rank would be to construct a logical framework. Which in turn would diffuse the gooey light of righteousness that they were bathed in, moment to moment, when engaged in political action.

Well, they wanted the war to end. And eventually they would permit speakers to mount the podium and speak to the cause. As Justin had testified, there were speakers removing themselves from the podium by the minute. This wasn't what they had expected back in their comfy campus offices or

whatever Starbucks that they had been stationed in before they had agreed to participate. They couldn't reconcile the chaotic image before them with the former image in their heads of what it would be like once in the process of moving the masses. At least at this locale, the masses seemed able to move deftly without any prodding. At best, the speakers seemed like cheerleaders at a football game egging the team on passively. Their participation seemed purely optional as if they had been brought in to add a veneer of respectability to the proceedings for the pleasure of the TV news cameras. Nothing they said would have any impact with an audience already politically motivated. Nobody from any side of any issue in America nowadays had much of an open mind. Because of this, there seemed no need to speak to anybody about anything. The political rhetoric on both sides of the debate was trending towards an overpowering silence, born of shorn vocal chords. When it finally arrived, it would be a relief to most citizens.

On stage, a video on a wide screen projector was showing a mosque burning against the backdrop of a setting orange sun infiltrated by bullet holes and human remains.

"I don't know what's happening to this goddamned country anymore," Justin Then said to Harry and fingered the fan of the Caddy's coiled drop top that had been partially extended in the aftermath of the attack on Bones. Harry had thought perhaps it might be in his best interest to try and hide such evidence from the prying eyes of others before thinking better of it. Better to display oneself nondescriptly if one wanted to avoid detection. But turning the drop top on and off so rapidly attracted attention.

It wasn't a bad look, he didn't think. It wasn't the sort of vehicle damage that he would feel motivated to deal with personally before turning the car in.

If Justin wanted, Harry said, he could hop in the passenger seat himself and they could take the land whale out

for a spin prefatory to Harry checking in at what was likely the last hotel he would stay in his whole life.

"We're taking the grand tour of America's prolapsed rectum," he said to Justin using Mud Holmes' quaint nickname for the entirety of the Gulf region. Less than three miles from the Mexican border as he was now, Harry considered the tour of the rectum complete. Any other southern progress should be considered bonus travel on his part. It was certainly extra-contractual and could not be expensed out.

He wasn't changed by the experience for the better as far as he could tell.

"It was supposed to be a comic romp with a lot of gawking at those people our readers felt morally superior to," he said to Justin once piloting the Caddy on Brownsville's Main Street. Every so often what seemed to him like a protestor would be spied walking towards the demonstration. He didn't know what any of them had expected to derive from the gathering. He didn't understand the rationale for protesting anything at all.

According to Harry, everything had gone sour once Bones made an appearance. This was the day before having visited the penitentiary in Florida.

"He's a drag on the soul, that one," he told Justin Then. Finding the parking lot to Brownsville's lone Holiday Inn weirdly deserted, Harry decided to drive around it for a while before heading in. Check-in time was not for another hour but that likely made no difference to an establishment that looked mostly vacant. They'd let you into your clean room anytime you wished and probably let you stay free for an extra night if you made the request nicely. The pool and lounge area were all yours for as long as you wanted. There was a convention of RF car racers due here by the weekend. And it wouldn't be until then where company would make itself known.

The execution of Rev. Muto, despite his infamy, had not made so much as a ripple in the local hotel and tourist

Death Trip 176

industry. Folks in Texas were used to death penalty implementation. The execution wouldn't make even make any of the local newspapers (presently published on-line only). Whatever ceremony his cult would enact would take place away from the press, Harry Cain excluded. So many were trying to forget the events that led up to the execution. They didn't want to revive the considerations that would lead to the suggestion of collective guilt. At most, they would check the prison roster to make sure it had occurred. And then one more country song could be released to the local stations almost out of relief. They had a suspicion that the man was immortal like evil itself. They had a belief system in place about him that made it hard to conceive of his death through ordinary circumstances:

*Well, they finally gone and done it/
And strapped his fat ass down/
They finally dropped the pellet/
In and lay him inna ground*

*Old Rance is dead, Rance is dead/
Without his walkin' cane/
Imagine where he is right now/
What he's feeling/
Or what the Devil's sayin'*

Local charting song only, this, written by an artist who used "Boss" as his first name. Other folks outside Cameron County wouldn't have been aware of the references. To them, the song would sound like the seventeenth century tradition of murder ballads, only with the state of Texas as the insane paramour and Rev. Muto as the slain beloved, laid out on a bed of flowers next to an ever-replenishing spring. It was irony recognizable only by the culturally literate amongst us. Harry Cain would have been aware of it had he stuck around for a few more weeks in Texas to hear the song. Bones most certainly would have been aware of it had his injuries and the

subsequent intense pain in his sinus cavity been diminished to the point that he could pay attention.

Cain's real beef with his photographer was his apparent certainty that all of life was meaningless and should be treated with the cool detachment that one would adopt while experiencing a particularly absurd dream. At such moments one should simply close one's eyes and wait for the circus parade to pass by. There was no need to be either concerned or amused by that which one had just witnessed.

There was nothing to it, according to him. One should only play along once one felt one would be suitably amused by the results.

"I found his insistency on this matter annoying in the extreme," Cain told Justin once entering the room that the Holiday Inn was nice enough to give him so early in the afternoon. He threw his bag on the bed and made a beeline for the room's AC unit. Pumping out cool air as it was set on low, it was still nearly eighty degrees in here. He was going to run it in on high for an hour then find the swimming trunks he had bought at a Wal-Mart in Metamere.

He had bought them on the way out of Metamere right after bearing witness to the death-by-lethal injection enactment. It was awful to watch, simply because it was so quiet and dignified. The condemned had said a prayer to the Lord and begged for forgiveness to the family members of all those he had harmed. As best as Harry could tell (which being a tyro on these matters was not so good at all), they hadn't fucked with the drip at all. The condemned seemed to go to sleep and his body stiffened briefly. Two minutes later, the prison doc came and checked for a pulse. And then they were all escorted from the room.

Harry thought it so nefarious. As here was a mode of killing that if done properly could be taken as painless (and thus appeal to various squeamish members of the Fourth Estate whose real objection to capital punishment was all the meat rending that went on as the deed was done).

"That was always his thing with me, especially as regarded the articles themselves," he said to Justin of Bones and wearily took off his clothes. Black trousers and white short-sleeve shirts being the entirety of his wardrobe for this trip, on a steamy day like this he couldn't wait to be liberated from their presence. "His attitude towards the condemned as to the whole of the human race was one of cold indifference," he said to Justin Then. "But he never defended what he believed. I just felt he was a cunt," Harry Cain said. "I told him this to his face repeatedly. But he couldn't be bothered to provide a witty response," he said. "To him, it was like a three-year-old insulting him. He couldn't take offense at something somebody of my ilk had to say to him. And I never angered him enough for him to be forced to speak about what he exactly meant."

Moisturizer and shampoo bottles had been placed in the large bathroom as well which was a first for this trip certainly. This was the sort of establishment that years ago when out on the road with his band Harry would have dreamt of staying in. Raising Cain had dreams of "making it" just like any other band. They didn't want to be famous really, just accepted and financially viable. They conceived of staying in Holiday Inn's while out on tour to be a supreme leap forward in social rank. Never happened with the Cains, despite their best efforts. To this day, Harry couldn't say what he had done wrong.

Padding around in his birthday suit in front of a relative stranger would have in other circumstances caused a little bit of consternation in him. Of late, he was finding himself utterly liberated of shame. He had no intellectual justification for the absence. It wouldn't have mattered who was there with him. He was overtired and not processing at full capacity. It also might have had a lot to do with the copious amount of drugs he had been fed while in Louisiana.

He wanted to fuck, to have his dick sucked by somebody. So he invited Justin Then onto the bed with him by spreading his pasty legs out on the comforter and looking at him.

"You have any weed around?" Justin Then asked him. The backpack that Justin was carrying with him was on the room's carpeted floor at this point. He was standing in front of the AC unit imbibing the cool air. It was too comforting at the moment to walk away from.

Somewhere in the muddy waters of Harry Cain's mind the question registered.

"I gave up weed long ago," he told him. "And I think you should too."

"Why's that," Justin asked him.

"Infernal hippie shit," he said. Then, "come over here and earn your keep."

Just in the state it was in, however, Harry Cain's cock was doing nobody any good, least of all himself.

"Play with it awhile," he told Jason. "And maybe it'll do something. It's not too late, I don't think, for me. Rub it a little bit and we'll see what happens. If nothing happens, eventually we'll go in a different direction. We'll wind up ordering up ice cream later until one of us decides to leave."

On Harry's exposed right side, there was a large growth that was in the midst of developing features even as he played with himself affectless-ly.

"Does it hurt," Justin Then said to him and was so bold to palpate the growth with three fingers. He was on the bed now kneeling at Harry's side. Suddenly he was feeling a good deal better about things. The AC had this effect on him. He was trying his best not to be the scold that the present look in Harry's eyes suggested he was soon to be accused of being.

Rather than answer him directly, Harry Cain simply turned over and inspected the area softly because it was so large he had not been aware of its presence to begin with.

"Right now, I'm doubting your fundamental reality and mine," he said to him and in his mind formed an image of the image he had experienced the other day when first exposed to Fratricyclene. So it had been communicated to him by John Wayne Gacy that all life proceeded in a single instant with no

real distinction to be made between past, present and future. For him, that moment was the first instance of wakefulness in an otherwise meaningless life. Of course, such clarity of vision had the opposite effect that it was advertised to have. It clarified nothing and distorted everything. But for him it seemed to open the world as if it was a springtime woosh of weather acting upon a recalcitrant rose. Soon enough it was obvious to him what must be. This feeling by itself was likely illusory but to Harry it was utterly convincing. At least for the moment he could believe himself to have evolved into some higher level of being. He had not yet been across the border to Matamoros and had his brains scrambled righteously by men who had themselves lost the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Or maybe they could distinguish, but weren't in any mood to honor the distinction. He hadn't yet encountered the personification of his own bad choices. Once he had, he would become regretful over the choices he had made thus far. He would see the error of his ways, so to speak. But this would not be enough to save him.

Presently he was still considering himself to be part of some sort of druggy avant-garde. He had no desire to sort things out. He knew he was fading away but couldn't do anything about it. He felt it was all for the best essentially but couldn't intellectualize this feeling. It was all for the best according to him even though he had no idea why. He needed to see a doctor but had come to doubt the very concept of disease. Life was proceeding for him just in the way he imagined it would. He had an answer for himself which was that none of it was real. He was convinced, despite best evidence, that logic was his enemy. He didn't know when he had slipped over to the dark side that Bones had occupied solely and started to believe in it.

The growth in his side eventually would grow arms and legs slowly. Soon it would evolve a type of ichthyoid mouth with stalactite teeth that terrified on first viewing.

It would try to form words but would fail with each attempt. Its brain would be too undeveloped to ever articulate words properly. It was parasitic in every way. And when the host died, the parasite died with it.

At the hour of his visit with Rev. Muto the next day, Harry had his still slightly damp bathing trunks on underneath his black suit. He had worn them not necessarily as any sort of internal fashion statement but as a defiant show against the physical reality impinging all about him despite his constantly stated belief since Louisiana that he was not of this world any longer. He didn't consider himself somebody with anything to hide. He had dully considered wearing his bathing suit and nothing else to the execution. He assumed there would be trouble if he had. His dreams would be in the process of devouring the dreamer. He found this preposterous in the extreme. He felt that other people were not doing the requisite heavy lifting of imagining themselves out of existence quickly enough to satisfy the dreamer's growing demand of having the drama be at an end.

Cain, for the first few minutes that he was sitting down, was twitching. It was as if the metal chair they had procured for him during this interview had a car battery wired to it.

"There's a rash there, yeah," he said to Reverend Muto through the half-opaque plastic of the security screen that had been soldered over the bars of this otherwise non-descript death row, "But I suppose it'll go away with time."

The security screen was an attempt to create another layer of protection for the prison staff who were required to tend to America's Most Notorious Death Row Inmate in his final days. He hadn't done anything yet to anyone. But the threat of violence was so pronounced in Rance's presence, the prison guard union had demanded that it be put in place as a preventative measure.

Unlike other states, Texas killed its inmates at six pm promptly, if only to forestall the paying out of double time for extra-hours work. So, it was in two hours that the "poison

pellet" of the Boss would be dropped. Cain, discounting the warden himself, was the last person who would speak to Rance Muto in this world. It wasn't that he or his music was esteemed in Rance's eyes. Hardly. Maybe it was simply a matter of the luck of the draw.

On the way in, the guard demurred when asked by Harry how many other journalists had taken this same walk.

Maybe *Filth* was simply the last publication that had submitted a request. Regardless, here he was in the Reverend's presence while in the Shadow of the Valley of Death.

The Reverend had immediately asked about the state of Cain's undergarments when noticing Harry's barely perceptible squirming. He was wondering aloud about the condition of Harry's nervous system before settling on the undergarments as an answer.

Something was wrong with them perhaps. Rance wondered aloud if maybe in the hurry to get out here, Harry had not selected his boyfriend's smallish pair of boxers instead.

He was accustomed to running games on all sort of folk in this same manner routinely. In fact (and given his present consignment quite obviously), such forwardness was the least of the Rev's idiosyncrasies. Being an outlier in all things, he knew he was in the driver's seat in most relationships. He didn't give a damn if his story was ever told. He had already created a myth about himself that rode way ahead of the facts. To him, myth and fact were interchangeable commodities. Being bat shit crazy, he would believe that. He didn't have to take drugs like Harry took them to have arrived at this conclusion. Mama Muto was a whore who let her johns do what they would with Rance while he was a child. Violence was his Fratricyclene, curdling the universe at the edges like paper set to flame. But he was too young to know what he was missing once objective reality disappeared. He didn't know how evil he was absent of an appropriate moral

template. He felt he was God after a fashion, re-writing the rules as he proceeded. On many occasions, moral men asked him to recant and he refused. He didn't know why they were picking on him solitarily. He felt himself in many respects a completely upstanding fellow.

He fucked with people constantly. And sometimes he hurt people and sometimes he killed them because he felt this was the normal thing to do.

"The reason I became a man of the cloth," he said to a slightly irritated Cain, "was to create for myself a moral pillar upon which to stand. To stand in the elevated manner I was never able to master as a child. I wanted to see things the way they were apart from the way I assumed they were. I needed the information to become a better scourge of humanity at once. I needed to see their weaknesses to exploit them to the fullest and whenever I wanted."

The *Start a New Religion* kit was sent away for by Rance in 1978 after an ad for it was discovered in the back pages of an old *Doc Savage* comic (next to a whoopee cushion promo).

"They gave you a plastic collar on which you could write anything you wanted," Rance told Cain. "Also, a frameable certificate, and a bunch of forms for tax exempt status," he told Harry after he asked. "You got what you paid for, I suppose," he said recalling the kit's two ninety-nine price tag, not including postage. "The point was it was something to build on to make it seem like I had a privileged status. I needed a theology to call my own," he said. "Couldn't have been that hard to come up with something," he said. "It's all the same pot of gumbo that you dig into anyway, when you contemplate celestial matters. Just at the outset I couldn't think it would have been more than two minutes to derive my church's mission statement."

The single sentence the Rev. Muto had come up with after a ninety-minute burst of activity at his local library was *Find Freedom in Terror*.

"I thought that was the key," he said to Cain. "The ability to transcend the limits of your ordinary perceptions by leaving self-consciousness behind."

The need to be afraid according to him—and as a moral person to instill fear in others—was all important in finding what the ancient Hebrews inaccurately described as godhead. He didn't have real theology as such, at least starting out. Rather, he had an inkling of what theology should be. He wanted to grant people release, if only to show them how ludicrously empty their lives had been to start out. Towards the end of his spree, he legitimately thought he was doing the world a favor. He was sick of their pusillanimity. He felt he was improving them greatly, first with torture then disfigurement then death. It was the relish with which the death penalty was imposed, not the sentence itself that had surprised him somewhat, putting him off his mash. What was good for the goose was good for the gander, after all. Despite his ordination, he didn't believe himself above ordinary men. He felt that the ritual surrounding death penalty promulgation was absurd. He felt it had nothing to do with the impetus to find freedom in terror.

Harry Cain might, after reviewing his voluminous notes on the Reverend, discover that he was for the most part a no-nonsense type when it came to killing. He was abetted by the mighty drive to avoid detection for as long as possible.

"I leave all the thinking about my motivation to the FBI profilers," he said to Cain recalling for him one interview with a federal psychiatrist stretching over nine hours. They had all wanted to know what made him tick. But Rance himself couldn't care less. He merely assumed something had gone wrong with him deep inside. He felt fine and upbeat most of the time. He saw himself as differently abled more so than a cat whose brain would need to be seized then dissected by the State of Texas upon his death to find out what had happened.

Rance Muto had killed one hundred sixty-seven people, according to the courts. But, according to him, the number

was far closer to three hundred sixty-seven. He had volunteered the information to the prison shrink but it was assumed as a dodge to delay execution. In the pursuit of justice, they could spend years searching out shallow graves in the remote fields and abandoned backyards of the American Southwest. He had several names at the ready for immediate confirmation, but the shrink was not willing to listen. Like so many others, he was massively anxious while in Rance Muto's presence. The thought of having to travel with him on a multi-state journey filled the shrink with a dread so palpable as to feel like a roiling black liquid filled his stomach. It would result in him vomiting for days on end until he perished from the exertion. He refused to look Rance in the eyes and didn't care if the ultra-perceptive serial killer picked up on the aversion. Rance had seemed to have mastered the blink reflex completely and could maintain eye contact for as long as you were willing to maintain eye contact with him. Hours from death and putatively despairing, he never looked away from you regardless. He was trying to goad you into something apparently. Or perhaps this was a form of passive hypnosis wherein once under you would be at his mercy for the duration of the trance. Think of this: killing someone now would only work in Rance's favor as the warden would be obliged to stop the execution in order so that the case could be processed. Certainly Rev. Muto had considered this. But for some reason he lacked the impulse to kill somebody for this lone benefit. He had guaranteed Harry safe passage out of this death row. Moreover, he was satisfied with his life history. He was ready to die. Everything else would register as redundant if it was allowed to go on. He would kill and kill again merely. It was all passé by now. The last hundred murders had assumed the low intensity feel of a pastime with him. He had been relieved that the punishment phase of his life was underway. It was a great new adventure. He seemed equally relieved that the punishment phase was almost at an end. The threat of retribution in the afterlife he

found utterly absurd. He had laughed heartily whenever the chaplain had mentioned it to him.

Rance's first kill had been in the winter of 1980 in Tulsa, Oklahoma when a panhandler downtown had the misfortune of petitioning the white-faced young man for five dollars to buy a pint of liquor and maybe a stick of beef jerky if there was something left over.

"I asked him what he was drinking and he said bourbon," Rance told Harry. "And I said 'no good.' And I took out this hunting knife of mine that I had been carrying around for speculative purposes only at that point and began to slash. Slash first near him and then in him," he said. "Oh, he was surprised at the moment more than hurt, I guess. Eventually he went down on the sidewalk in a heap. So, what I did then was take him under the arm and escort him to a back alley. Yes, the back alleys of the world are a godsend to men of my stripe. There, you see, nobody has the courage to ask what you are doing. They look at two figures moving about in a shadow and assume there was a fight. That's all. In such a situation while in a back alley even a cop would be reluctant to intervene. They would wait for it play out merely. They wouldn't think about sorting out the right and wrong of a situation if such a thing was even possible. They would realize where they were over time. They would figure perhaps the situation would sort itself out. And there would be justice to be found in the result."

What Rance did with the body on this first kill was just leave it there it in the place it had fallen. He had assumed he would be arrested for the crime, but, after several weeks, when not so much as a single police inquiry had been encountered, he grew to savor this first experience of murder. He had been surprisingly calm while murdering, intent and workmanlike like a butcher at his labors. The blood-stained garments for this first kill he did not bother disposing of at all until a year later. He was naïve about the protocols of the

criminal justice system. Just then, he was not trying to get away with a goddamn thing.

The urge to hunt grew within him constantly. But it wasn't until 1982 that he became what he considered to be a true serial killer. By then, he had killed three others in the same random fashion as the first. He was gaining fresh knowledge with each new experience about how men died. Unlike in the movies, in most cases, it took them awhile. And the key always was disposing of the one hundred and eighty so pounds of meat, bone, and blood that had been left behind. In relation to him getting away with it, it was a zero-sum game. In which every molecule of dead person needed to be accounted for. His evolved technique was to isolate the body so that when he or she died there would be time to burn, bury, or dismember the corpse thoroughly enough to evade detection from inquiring forces.

"If you're a true serial killer," he told Harry, "you have a lot on the ball. You have an advanced plan, you have a methodology that takes into consideration all the weird shit that happens on these field studies you engage in. It's just like Marlin Perkins going out in the bush to discover something about Mother Nature. You need to be prepared for what's coming at you as by-and-large some of these motherfuckers are ornery as a warthog when they realize what your intentions are towards them. They figure they have nothing to lose at that point. But if you get hurt in the field, you tend to stay hurt. If only because once they squirm free, you're now the prey. It's a certifiable embarrassment every time it happens but that doesn't mean you can prevent it from happening completely. Finally, it's the game itself asserting its rules over you. Just as you have asserted it over others. You're part of the animal kingdom and will be consumed by other predators whether or not you're willing to admit this is the case. Mother Nature doesn't need your consent to fuck with you. She's the ultimate serial killer, really. She's the one to emulate."

Rance paused a moment while all this was recorded by Harry Cain in his reporter's notebook.

"Thus, you see no reason to cry about what they're preparing to do to me down to the hall. It's all part of the natural order if you want to know the truth. It's a lesson that they too finally need to learn when they are chased and cornered. At that point they can't cry and say they were victims of an injustice. They're all part of the food chain. They're not better than me and only a little worse. They're worse because they preserve in their delusions that they are administering justice."

The "cane" that was constantly being alluded to in the documentaries of Rance Muto's exploits was in fact the right femur of one of his early victims that he had formed by means of a band saw, nails, and epoxy into a type of walking stick. Devoid of suspicion at that point, he would take the stick around with him on errands about town.

"I wanted to see where the limits were and how far the obvious truth of a particular situation could be put on display long enough until it is recognized by those who were supposed to realize such things as part of their job," he said to Harry. He recalled that after being given a scrupulous once over by a store attendant, Rance got cold feet about the stick and retired it from public view. It next made an appearance in a courtroom in 1998 during the sentencing phase of his first trial. The prosecutor was making a big deal of the presence of such an object existing in the world at all, never mind where he had carried it. To Rance, it was all in good fun, a bit of whimsy exercised in an avocation — if that's what you wanted to call it — that was all too often subject to gray expressions of violence and authoritarianism. If this was him at his worst, it was difficult to see why he needed excising from the earth. He couldn't conceive of the pathology behind the act. He had a notion to make all his accoutrements and some of his furniture from human remains. He thought he was starting a fashion. He thought genuinely he had earned

the right to do so because he had gathered the remains himself. They were his property. They were hunter's pelts that should be allowed to form into whatever trophy he wanted them to despite what moral qualms might arise.

Towards the end of his spree, Rance was operating at great personal risk. This was due to consecutive waves of FBI warnings concerning his operations over the eighties and the first half of nineties.

"I think they caught on to what was taking place somewhere around '91," he said to Cain who had of late been writing in the notebook as furiously as he might. He was not making another sketch like he had while interviewing the prisoner in Mississippi, Fine. Rather, he was in the midst of some sort of personalized shorthand that was capturing the rudiments of that which Rance was communicating to him. Rance's testimony felt more important somehow to Cain than Fine's. It felt more relevant to his own dead man walk. He had started the walk weeks back while in the Florida state pen. Unlike Fine, Rance Muto also seemed to be in the midst of communicating forthrightly. He saw himself as the spiritual avant-garde. He was imparting his methods and philosophy unto Cain.

He clearly had a handle on a new way of thinking. He was proud of his life accomplishments seemingly. He felt in need of a herald. He was trying to communicate the realization that people had no need to be afraid of him. He was trying to imply that dying and murder were individual aspects of the same act. Good and Evil had flown from the world hundreds of years ago. Presently there was only physics and biology to contemplate when thinking over the rightness of one's holy vision. He was trying to announce himself as somebody in the know about so many things. He was not a reverend in need of a flock certainly. He was merely as open as any human being had ever been to discussing his own tastes and predilections.

Through constant practice, he had become accomplished with the logistics of murder.

"Everywhere I travelled in those days I made sure to buy a house with a basement," he said to Harry, neglecting to say where he had come upon the money to finance the purchases. "Once you have a basement," he told Harry, "you have some sort of half-fortress that you can make improvements to at your will without nosy neighbors making inquiries," he said to Harry. "Usually you have a concrete foundation with a ten-inch deep sump underneath it that you can throw corpses into at your leisure. Just jackhammer up the floor and throw the body in there with a little bit of quick lime spread on top. The smell you can attribute easily to a leaky sewer pipe if anybody asks," he said. "I mean, it's the simplest thing to get away with," he said. "The remains could well sit there for the entire time that the house is standing. You blacken the basement windows and place soundproofing around the openings and go to work. You can buy concrete by the hundred-pound bag. You can rent a jackhammer and use it only in the afternoon when the close neighbors would be reluctant to complain."

Sometimes the Reverend would torture then kill his victims in the residence in question, sometimes he would commit the murder in a secluded public space like a park then transport him or her back to the residence via a now notorious white van with a fake bottom he had constructed exactly to transport the dead.

"Murder's always a crime of opportunity regardless of what claims are made by the psychopath about their ability to plan," Muto said to Harry Cain and asked him for a cigarette. You would have thought at this late hour such a meager request wouldn't have been refused. But even if Harry had brought smokes with him, they would have been confiscated at the first checkpoint. Just a bit of pettiness on part of the prison that in Rance's opinion they needed to check if the screws were to sleep well for the remainder of their days. He had closed his eyes and imagined a curse descending on each

guard. The steak they gave him as a final meal last night was burnt to a crisp, but he had wolfed it down anyway. He still had vague aspirations of attacking one of them before they sealed the metal door in the gas chamber behind them. He hadn't worked out the logistics of how this would be done exactly but when the time came, he would be hyper-aware. He thought maybe about falling down the row of stairs they were obliged to escort him down and tripping one of the guards as he did so. Who knew what would occur exactly after he did that. They likely had their own plan worked out if any prisoner pulled the shit Rance was thinking of pulling. Likely it might entail just tasing him repeatedly and dragging him off to his doom. In Texas, they weren't particular about such niggling matters as civil rights. They had afforded the Rev. due process. They would allow themselves to be sued successfully by the ACLU if that was what was required to let justice be done. Down here they had a profoundly defined sense of right and wrong. It didn't bother them hardly if the rest of the world condemned them for it. The judgmental sovereignty of Sweden, for example, had never produced a being as noxious as Rance Muto. Let them do so and then they could be able to judge what was humane and inhumane treatment of such a person.

The way Rance liked to kill his prey, once he got into the groove and relaxed, was through slow torture. This was an amalgam of crucifixion, flaying, repeated sodomization and drowning.

"I shed a tear for every mother mourning on my account," he said to Cain when the invariable question came regarding if he possessed a sense of guilt. He smiled broadly. He had in his view nothing to be guilty about. For the simple reason that he had served his own dark muse faithfully. Echoing Aleister Crowley, he thought real sin lay in the mere denial of one's passions, regardless of how base they might be. No, he didn't believe in guilt at all. It simply never occurred to Rance to see his actions in the moral light Cain was implying that he

should. If his victims had wanted to live, they should have fought back a little harder, according to him. Or been all the more guarded when he was on crutches, faking a broken leg. He had asked them for a little help in loading his groceries in the soundproofed back of his van and they obliged him. So, fuck them, therefore. He was improving the gene pool through his actions. He deserved to be rewarded rather than executed.

Always in such encounters, according to Rance, there was a tipping point encountered where the victim simply gave up and waited for the inevitable to occur, screaming now only as an involuntary reflex, less a strategy to attract attention by a Good Samaritan.

"At that point, always, I would smile and kiss them on the forehead and tell them this was what it had been building up for them all along. That this was the culmination of their lives: to act as a food source (emotionally speaking) for another creature higher up on the food chain. At a certain point you must recognize the debt you owe to the greater whole and become the universe's victim. That you, the individual, are nothing except in relation to something higher than yourself. You stop struggling then and start wondering why you had ever struggled to begin with."

When the time came for him, he would breathe the cyanide gas as deeply as possible like he had been counseled to do during the ten-minute orientation they had provided him with yesterday.

"Probably they met with me in order to scare me about it," he said to Harry. "To put me off my lunch so I won't have any peace of mind. But the thing that you need to know my friend is that this is the moment I've been waiting for all along. I slept like a baby last night, actually," he told Cain. "I don't believe that there's anything untoward that they could conceive of doing to me anymore. I've given up long ago on the notion that I have dominion over all things."

Already his grave was dug for him and within hours of his execution he would be consigned to the earth in a plywood box constructed merely for the sake of social convention.

"They don't want to put their hands on me before or after I merge with the infinite," he said to Harry and smiled. "They think evil's a communicable illness like the common cold," he said. "To me it's an absurd conceit. To me such a conceit is simply individuals refusing to admit what they have been all along. I'm not any different from them really except in the guts department. But they want to isolate themselves from me and pretend I'm some sort of alien form of life. It's not appreciated by me even a little, I'll have you know. On the other hand, none of these screws are obliged to humor me unto my demise."

The only request he would make would to be allowed to enter into the gas chamber without his prison slippers on.

"There's something about footwear for a corpse that's inappropriate as it comes," he said to Harry, rehearsing the arguments he would make with the screws in a few hours. "It's unseemly and pretentious," he said. "It's as if you're denying the obvious about what's to happen by making believe you were merely taking a walk and got railroaded into the gas chamber."

More than anything, a man's worth should be measured by his ability to accept his fate impassively.

Rance thought there was a sense of modesty required of the condemned that would not be served by wearing even as commonplace a fashion accessory as a pair of socks. It all needed to be suppressed, the vanity and the forward-thinking past the point when the Great Transition was made. Dying was a modest act that shouldn't be accompanied by any measure of haughtiness. To him this was self-evident. Very likely the screws with whom he would be negotiating would see things differently and he would be forced to take up arms against them.

Sensing that he would do exactly this, the screws had soldered the security screen onto the outside of the bars one day devoid of either explanation or apology.

"They declared me an animal and invited me to act that way," Rance said to Harry who was probing at the polyurethane screen with the tip of one shoe. At another stop along the way, Rance had reached out to a disrespectful maintenance worker and strangled him with the power cord on one of his tools. Apart from this, he believed himself a model prisoner. He didn't think the screws down here in Brownsville had cause to hate him. He instilled fear in every person he met even before his crimes were known. He didn't think this by itself was cause enough to ex-communicate him from the human race.

He would have been offended if he had been in possession of the proper amount of spiritual fat around his soul to be offended by anything. Truth be told, the entire ritual surrounding death penalty promulgation was a complete bore to him. He was ready to die in his bare feet. He was considering with supreme anticipation the rest that would finally come to him.

"Any last words I have for the world you can make up for yourself," he said to Cain dismissively when the inevitable question was asked. He thought the question didn't dignify a straightforward response. He thought it was beneath Harry Cain if truth be told. He thought it was spoken as a mere obligation.

"You tell them I'm sorry for everything I did and I look forward to meeting the Lamb of God in the afterlife and begging him for forgiveness. Up until the point that salvation is granted to me if only as an afterthought."

Rance Muto said this to Harry Cain, using altogether different words. What words exactly didn't really matter, as he clearly didn't mean any of it. He ended the interview with Cain by turning his back to him on the metal cot and feigning sleep. He was naked from the waist up and on his back there

was a tattoo of two black wings caught in mid-flight. Something written in between the beating wings that Cain at a conscious level couldn't make out. But deep down it was made known to him explicitly:

E 'n la sua volontade è nostra pace

Two hours later, Cain was behind three-inch plexiglass watching the Rev. being strapped in as if on a trip to the moon.

"Dirty feet, it offends me to no end. I can't say how or why, but it does," Shay Loving, one of the four civilian witnesses allowed in to the control room for this occasion, said to Harry as the straps were being put in place around Rance's enormous body. Indeed, he had gone to the gas chamber as requested: barefoot. The soles of his feet were tar black and weirdly transfixing as they bobbed there in the air momentarily, per the order of the executioner, to set the pellet trap proper. Hydrogen cyanide gas being too dangerous to store in critical amounts, the way this particular chamber worked was that once the order had been given, a pellet of potassium cyanide would be dropped into a vat of hydrochloric acid underneath the chair, bathing the condemned in the dark green cloud for exactly twelve minutes. Presently the jailer needed to inspect the opening where the pellet was soon to pop out, checking that it was free of occlusions. The jailer needed Rance to lift his feet for a few seconds to get a good look at the opening. A wiser protocol would have been to check it before. But nobody, save Shay Loving, seemed in thrall to correct protocol. This execution, unlike the others he had been allowed to witness down here, had the informal feel of a company softball game. Nobody was in a big hurry to get it over with, least of all the jail's warden. He was back in the control room solving the final stages of a Sudoku. He seemed bored with his work thoroughly. He seemed to be doing his best to stifle a yawn.

Death Trip 196

Nine, no, ten men, were executed in this Brownsville facility during the first seven months of the year. According to the yawning Warden Klein, this high rate was mostly on account of the drug epidemic rampant in the United States. These dumbasses get high, then get hooked, then they get in trouble then they are caught and convicted. The worst of the worst you have making the same dead man's walk to the gas chamber.

"Don't feel sorry for 'em, no," Klein said to Harry and watched with half-lidded eyes him scribble notes in that damned notepad of his. "If that is your question, anyway. Do I feel sorry for them? No, I don't feel sorry. Not even a jot. As we're all capable of moral choice. And we all know right from wrong even as we know our head from ass instinctively."

Not willing to talk about this point in any serious detail (as Harry Cain was seemingly not willing to press him on it), they moved onto the mechanics of death by exposure to hydrogen cyanide gas. Vis-à-vis how long it would take and when it was over what were the procedures for removing the body.

"I use this stopwatch right here," Warden Klein said pointing to his right temple. "No, there's nothing official with any of this, but after it starts, we're concerned mostly with the safety of our guards who have to go in there and sanitize the area after the All Clear is given."

There was an ammonia-based solution that neutralized the cyanide that they would coat the chamber with afterwards upon the body's removal.

"We wear hazmat suits and check for a pulse and respiration manually," Klein said, grouching that the electronic equipment that was supposed to do the same had been denied to them on account of budget cuts at the state level. There was a certain risk to the guard checking the vital signs. If a pulse had been detected, the next step would be to inject a vial of potassium chloride directly into the condemned's carotid

artery and wait. It was all very 1940s regarding the level of technology that was being employed in the endeavor. Klein thought the prison worker's union needed to intervene at some point. He thought there were legitimate workplace safety concerns involved in the need to process the corpse in a more remote, automated fashion.

The death certificate was not signed until after the body was wheeled outside into the hallway after being doused with the ammonia-based neutralizer.

"Doc checks for a heartbeat and holds a mirror under the boy's nose just like they do in the movies," Klein told him of the inspection process. He dipped his Stetson brim underneath his eyes briefly. He was sick of this skinny boy asking him questions obviously and wanted to be rid of him. Who invited him in the first place was a mystery to Warden Klein. If he had known that fielding such questions for a New York-based publication would be part of his day's duties, he would have called in sick. He couldn't stand being in the presence of these uppity New York liberals. He had no intention of either defending or condemning the death penalty as it was implemented in the Republic of Texas. Or any other goddamned place for that matter.

He would rather answer Harry's questions as calmly as he might until the moment arose where he could leave his presence without so much as prefatory announcement that he was doing so. He was not here to make a new friend. And he assumed the same of Harry.

He thought Cain was just another political activist intent of vilifying this particular segment of the thin blue line. He had no use for him certainly either as a person or a journalist. If it was up to Klein, Harry and old Rance might be allowed to change places. It wouldn't bother him a bit if this happened. He believed that all evil men got theirs in the end. He thought celestial justice was a self-evident proposition.

Minutes later, Rance's blackened feet were lowered and his ankles strapped in with three-pound straps.

Death Trip 198

"Means we're one step closer to having justice served for us all," Shay Loving told Cain, hoping to generate a useable quote. "It means were on the verge of having a wrong righted."

Slowly as he might, Warden Klein shuffled to the red telephone in the control room and checked the synchronized digital clock in the control room.

"It means supper's almost on to me. That's all," Klein said to Shay through the side of his twangy mouth. He gave the gesture instructing them to seal the gas chamber door.

For this procedure, if only to not risk cyanide contamination of the surrounding area, the jailers had installed sensors in the door indicating the achievement of an air tight seal.

"Now we're ready for her," Klein said when the digital clock had ticked a second after the hour and reached over Cain's shoulder. The red mushroom pushbutton that dropped the pellet into the acid bath was the same object Harry had been propping his notepad on. It might have been something that the Warden should have communicated to Harry beforehand. Chances were he didn't give a damn. Or it was against his basic nature to issue corrections to a fool.

Maybe there was a timer on the whole control panel activating it only at six pm. One would have hoped that this was the case. If only for the sake of the warden's employees one would have hoped that this was so.

Warden Klein seemed otherwise burned out. He seemed like he couldn't care less which of his immediate associates lived or which of them died.

Sealed as it was, the plopping of the sulfide canister into the acid bath was inaudible from the control room. One could only tell that it had even happened only by the smile that flitted past Rance Muto's lips.

Maybe it sounded funny to him, like a shit being taken. Maybe the smile was meant for Ms. Loving alone as he wanted to show what little effect the punishment was having

on him. He was die happy which in such a solipsistic age. Better off to leave him alive to stew in his own juices. But it was too late for that now.

Very soon Muto's smile developed troughs in its upper arc and devolved into a quaveringly nauseous expression.

"He's feeling it now," Warden Klein said and for the first time picked up the red telephone to see if there was a dial tone. No blame would come his way surely if there hadn't been, but he wanted to see just the same. Sure enough, the phone was in working order. The governor was out somewhere. Perhaps consulting scripture. Maybe he was in his office working.

Muto of all men wouldn't be spared. If he had been, the stay-granting governor might as well have resigned straight off. Folks in Texas'd be coming after him with pitchforks and M1's, not a blasted recall petition. He wouldn't have made it to the border alive.

Cyanide ingestion in even moderate amounts caused seizures and vomiting as the body's cells were chemically starved of oxygen and begin to die.

"Reason we strap 'em in like this so tightly is that there's a concern for the equipment with all that shaking that happens," the Warden said as Rance bit down on his tongue. Head shaking side to side as the green cloud emanating from under the chair finally reached his nostrils. To a partial extent it obscured his face like a veil. If he had been smart, Harry thought, Rance would have taken a deep breath in. On the other hand, by this point he had likely lost almost all motor control. He rolled his eyes and mouthed several words that could be interpreted as *dead death*. And that was it, motherfuckers. That was all she wrote for eternity.

Once the cloud had obscured him completely, the Reverend lapsed into a coma. According to Klein, they would wait for the gas sensors to sound the all-clear. Then they would check for signs of life.

Death Trip 200

It was a gradual procedure that registered as anti-climactic for those ready for a violent send-off of the man. For garish spectacle the electric chair was needed in Brownsville. This had gone into disuse just after the Mexican riots. They were too soft on condemned prisoners maybe in Texas nowadays with the knockout gas and lethal injections. It was not like Florida. The fear factor was so much less when they were allowed to sleep. It wasn't the dying but the torture preceding the dying where such scum were made to feel fear. Most of them were devoid of God Fear to begin with. In such instances, the State needed to take the place of God to teach these scumbags to quake in the presence of a higher power.

Warden Klein had, in all his years spent as an executioner down on the border, witnessed exactly one heartfelt apology from a man about to be sent to his death.

"And this was the only one that I am most convinced was from an innocent man," he said to Harry while escorting him outside. Not that he didn't trust Cain to see himself out. He was merely following procedure in this regard, a weary man eager to get home to supper.

He said the prisoner looked through the one-way glass into the chamber control room and collapsed with grief over what he had said he had done.

"What had he done, anyway?" the journalist in Harry had wanted to know.

"He was a cattle rustler of the old stripe," Klein told him. "A Tex-Mex. He would steal whole herds from the hill country ranches and drive them over a cliff," he said. "A ranch hand died during a stampede which earned him the gas chamber," he said. "But I'm convinced that he had nothing to do with it. He was a sin eater, merely. But when he apologized, his apology was as heartfelt as any I've heard. It's strange that this was the case. You're guilty in this life until you declare yourself innocent, I suppose. He knew what he was doing but I can't say what it was even now."

If he had a name, Klein wasn't in the mood to reveal just what it was exactly. And this Harry thought, at least from a storyteller's perspective, was exactly right. Devoid of a specific identity, the prisoner would survive in Harry's mind as more or less a half-imagined deity. He would be someone fundamentally unreal but profoundly meaningful. It wouldn't have bothered him at all to learn this fellow had been a mere fiction, devised from Klein's unexpectedly facile imagination. He wanted to get rid of Cain and leave him with a tall tale. Perhaps this was his way merely of being hospitable. Perhaps he felt bad for his original gruffness and wanted to throw Harry a bone for his next article.

You know you're at the end of your rope, Harry Cain thought, when you see the lies of others as profound and life affirming even though you know they're lies.

"I'm not seeing you clearly, not in the way you want me to, not in any consistent way. But in a way that makes it plain to me that you're not really there."

So the degraded goddess Aretmis spoke to Harry Cain from what could only be described as a heat-inspired dream vision once back in his Holiday Inn room. She lay the arrow shot yearling she had been carrying at Harry's feet. Tribute of some kind likely, though it was hard to figure out for what or why. She was since her last appearance that morning in declining health.

She was holding out her hands, maybe for love, maybe for alms. And the deer between them was not quite dead yet. Harry saw no reason to bear its presence even for a little while more.

So he picked the yearling up and tossed its twitching body out a mysteriously opened window. It landed with a splat on the concrete then into the same kidney-shaped pool he had been swimming in yesterday. It was eleven-thirty at night and still eighty-seven degrees. He thought about calling up Justin Then to come over. He needed a dip himself at some

Death Trip 202

point. He thought about the deleterious side effects just then of swimming alone.

Chapter Six: July 4, 2003

(Matamoros, Mexico)

Later that week Harry Cain emailed his final Death Trip article to Mud Holmes.

"I'm done with this shit, really am," he told Holmes in the email's body. He didn't want to get into it with him concerning future marketing opportunities. He didn't care so much anymore about the dictates of the wider world and the misery he incurred by ignoring it.

He wanted to be free to consider next steps vis-à-vis his personal destruction. This had been an on-going project with him since leaving the Florida trailer park. He wanted to get it over with ASAP. He assumed his race was run. He assumed he had nothing else interesting to do but snuff it.

He felt he needed help with it in some way, however. He was always like that, despite his superficial bohemianism: middle class and uninspired. He needed help with suicide's mechanics by an expert.

"If you put a pistol to your temple, make sure your elbow's propped up first on something firm," the gun dealer and *Death-with-Dignity* activist Bill Leach said to Harry Cain once absorbing his initial inquiry completely. It was typical weather in Brownsville for July, ninety one degrees at ten am with a dew point of seventy-one. Coming into Bill's store from the parking lot, Harry needed to take some time to towel

off. He had been placed in an unpleasant mental state by the atmosphere. He needed to collect himself and bask in the AC's ambience before continuing.

All through his attempt to acclimate Cain, Bill Leach had been talking about the need to keep the pistol he was going to use steady at all times through the depressing of the trigger.

"If you flinch halfway through it's no good," he said to Cain. "It's going to get messy and painful. You need to plan in advance for all that you encounter in your last moments. I've seen it myself from close-up: all the mistakes folks make. I know where it leads and why it happens. And so, I'm in a position to help you through it all."

Through the lattice works of his Texas twang, Bill Leach described the natural tendency of a pistol-wielding arm that was placed at an angle outside the framework of the body to become fatigued quickly and begin to drop despite all conscious efforts to keep it aloft. He described this dropping as inevitable, not a weakness of the spirit but a weakness of the flesh. He thought there was very little that could be done.

Bad things could happen to a potential suicide, according to Leach, when he or she fired a pistol at an angle upwards rather than straight across.

"You can simply fail to die, bottom line," he said to Harry. "And that's a tragedy in my estimation that needs to be prevented at all costs."

Bill described as best he could the damage an upward travelling bullet would make when encountering the brain's architecture. According to him, all the damage would be done to only one side of the frontal lobe. The bullet's tangentially-travelling shock wave would be diffused against the dura mater exclusively and the mostly intact skull.

"It's sad, sad, sad," Leach said and described for Cain the ravages such a miscalculation would cause to a victim. In most cases, the injury incurred would not be enough to kill a man but cause enough brain damage so that he was never able to try again.

"Turns you into a zombie, that sort of misfire," Leach said, "walking on the backs of your heels."

Leach recalled for Harry a similar customer of his, a chronically unemployed Mex, whose right arm at the very last moment had slipped.

"He looked OK from the outside," Bill said and spat. "Except for all the scars right around his hairline."

It was when the Mex tried to move anywhere, Leach recalled, that you could see how fucked up he was.

"He was forty-three, but he moved like he was ninety-seven," Harry said before recalling that the walker the Mex was forced to use was more of a hindrance than an aid for him. Eventually he was consigned to a wheelchair permanently. It was pathetic watching him pretend to be mostly normal. He needed to be removed from the view of other, less damaged souls. He was likely giving small children who viewed him nightmares. He had a mouth that wouldn't stop chewing imaginary food. He had tremble-y hands and a spastic face that refused to stop bubbling over like a batch of split pea soup that a cook had forgotten about long ago.

"You long for death at that point," Bill Leach told Harry Cain, momentarily putting himself in the Mex's shoes.

"But now your body's too mangled for you to do anything about it," he said. "So you're left to the tender mercies of strangers, begging for release from your suffering."

Being in the gun business, Bill Leach had seen the ravages of suicide many times from up close. And when they locked up Dr. Kevorkian years ago in Michigan, he decided to lend a hand. As far as Leach was concerned, there was no other man in these United States with a moral standing similar to himself. Absent him, you were on your own and incapable of acting. Shit out of luck.

"The deeper the projectile's path, the greater the damage," Bill who had been a medic during the First Persian Gulf War said to Harry Cain and explained why. He described the

brain as a mass of slightly hardened jell-o floating in a viscous fluid. Bill told Harry that the higher the entrance wound, the greater your chances were of surviving. The structure a prospective suicide wanted to hit most was the medulla oblongata down by the brain stem. Any damage to that structure caused instant death, according to Bill. You needed to be shot in the back of the head in the lower part of the skull, however, for such injury to be assured. For this, you needed to improvise. Unless you were clever enough to construct a remote triggering mechanism on your own, you needed help from an expert like him.

Maybe once he cashed out of his gun store, Bill Leach would go into business for himself selling a backwards triggering mechanism online in homage to Dr. Jack's homemade portable suicide drip. He assumed the mechanism would need to be assembled by a user. He assumed it would come with a neck rest and a bit of scripture carved into one arm.

Maybe a backwards facing mirror too should be included. A user could stare into it and be assured that everything behind him was functioning properly before the chain (or whatever sort of actuator attached to the gun's trigger) was pulled. It would be a sophisticated-looking product, produced and marketed with sophistication. It could go up on the Amazon website once a semblance of social acceptance was gained. Deluxe models would come with a communication module. This would alert police to the whereabouts of a body via pre-recorded message ten minutes later once the trigger was pulled.

Firearms for Every Occasion and for Every Walk of Life read the cardboard sign taped to the inside of Bill Leach's glass store front in the shadow of the B&M International Friendly bridge.

"If I was you," Bill Leach said to Harry, "Before you scratched your itch, I'd talk to a psychiatrist about it. Try and think things through, won't you, before things spiral out of

control. I would take all matters into consideration before you bought the gun. Because suicide of every human activity requires a clear mind to perform righteously. I know what I speak of here. I'm in the business. Or at least I should know anyway."

Looking for a pistol to shoot himself in the head with, Harry Cain had seemingly stumbled upon a Stetson-clad suicide guru.

"A doubled-barreled rifle inserted in the mouth is the best way to go," Leach said to Harry Cain, noting that a usual distance of less than three inches was required for a projectile to hit the brain stem from that position. Before you pulled the trigger, however, Bill said the proper etiquette demanded that you create a vacuum seal with your mouth. As it's the expelled air that caused such a mess at such scenes. The ejection trail caused by the bullet itself was surpassingly small. If a man was conscientious about such matters, that was what he should do. Or maybe he shouldn't kill himself at all.

You used the double-barrel to increase your already excellent chances of success, he said to Cain. Then Bill pointed to a burly shotgun hanging from the wooden rack behind him.

The Mossberg Maverick model had a twenty-eight-inch barrel and a single trigger that according to Bill was pulled easily enough when approached from the wrong direction. It held a twenty-gauge slug that was more than capable of doing the dirty deed with an optimal efficiency. Its use would likely prove a painless procedure. As the massive injuries caused by such a gun was enough to kill a person long before the pain loop from injury to brain and back again was completed. Even before the gun's muffled report penetrated a man's consciousness, he'd have merged with the infinite. Or at least been sufficiently degraded to offset any sort of fear or anxiety the transition from living to dead would instill. You wouldn't even know what happened, wouldn't have been aware that

you had died. It was a perfect ending for you, in other words, devoid of suffering completely. It was so attractive it was difficult to see why more people hadn't tried it already.

There was, therefore, something likely both Bill and Harry weren't getting about suicide. Neither of them were detecting much of a downside to it at the moment. There was something keeping others from attempting it. Which led one to believe that the conventional wisdom argued against the act utterly.

Technically it was illegal, at least on the U.S. side of the border. Nevertheless, it was Bill Leach's belief that a certain clientele of his had dedicated themselves to the proposition.

"The gung-ho types tend to buy weapons in a mail order fashion," Leach noted, unlocking the Mossberg for Harry's inspection. First thing you noticed about this weapon, and any other modern armament for that matter, was how well engineered it was. Devoid of ammunition, the Mossberg weighed only two and a half pounds. It ingratiated itself into a user's hands as if it was a pet cat. You could close your eyes and extend your arm and not be aware that the rifle was there.

According to Bill, its kick was mitigated by various balancing devices in the gun's stock. It was a military weapon. Men used this gun to kill other men. Hunters shied away from the gun generally owing to its expensive price and the more or less worthless feature of its over/under barrel configuration. When it came to taking down a ninety pound stag, one shell judiciously placed was more than enough.

Nowadays Mossberg-owners around the Rio Grande basin toted the weapon underneath the shifting Gadsden flag.

"It's the favorite gun of militias," Leach told Harry, declining to say exactly why. Each weekend, one would see such groups united under the snake-bearing flag come down in flatbed trucks from the north. In finding illegal immigrants, their protocol called for them to render a citizen's arrest (aka kidnapping) until such time that the perpetrator could be turned over to the border patrol. If the perpetrator resisted

such arrest, they were, according to some uniquely interpreted codicil of the Constitution, entitled to exercise police power against him or her. So it was that the Mossberg became the weapon of choice for that type of aspirant to paramilitary strength. They wanted the double-barrel option and the ability to quickly reload. The shotgun they used for pheasant and deer was elsewhere, gathering rust in their basements. Or maybe it had been confiscated by police long ago.

The problem for Cain was that he wanted to buy a gun right now.

"They see me toting that shotgun over my shoulder on the way to the plaza even the damn Mexican border patrol will stop me, I imagine," Harry said to Bill. "Never mind what the official BP will do when I try to walk back in later," he said to him. "That is, if I'm still alive."

And he doubted buying a gym bag and stashing the rifle and some twenty-gauge shells would prove much of an effective camouflage in this situation. Larcenous shit, you see, occurred hourly on both sides of the International Bridge and occasionally in its midst. Down here, people were wise to another's cons. The town of Matamoros in particular had been under siege for years by the *cartel del golfo*. *Los Zetas* everywhere nowadays trying to reclaim past glories. The United States *federales* correspondingly were down here in force trying as best they could to police an international line stretching from Brownsville to the Pacific Ocean.

Cain wanted to strap something to his side to conceal it from view until he decided to use it. He might take a room in Mexico and end it there. He had had various hallucinations in Alabama weeks ago about ending it south of the border from the start via an active volcano. He thought a Matamoros hotel room would do just as well in a pinch. And maybe from the stand point of easefulness even better. Apart from this idea was the growing sentiment that a man needed a gun in this life just as he needed a best friend. Once he had seen Leach's store with his its handmade sign, he knew that he would buy

something within it. Now it was only a question of what he could get away with carrying outside. Shotguns of every stripe he imagined would be confiscated at the border. He wanted something small and concealable that he could keep under his clothes. He wanted a quick lesson about how to unlatch the safety. But that was it. He assumed a certain randomness to his ending would be apropos. He thought it would be hilarious if he shot one big toe off by accident when in the midst of scratching an itch.

An aficionado of old things, Bill had an old six shooter, an old policeman's service revolver that he could sell to Cain for a hundred-twenty-five dollars, not including the fees for gun license registration.

"Little bit of rust on the exterior of the barrel," he said to Cain as he dug around in one of the bottom drawers for it. Basically, it was the cheapest gun in his possession. He did not keep it under lock and key in the manner of the rest of his armory. If some boy wanted to come in and steal it from him, he could certainly try. He didn't think the gun held much re-sell value. He wasn't sentimental about such things. He wasn't a dealer in antiques.

Down here on the lip of a war zone, folks unsurprisingly didn't sentimentalize their guns as might be the case with Americans north of Mason and Dixon's famous line.

"You bring a charming historical trinket to a gunfight, you deserve to die, deserve to lose," was how Bill Leach put it to Harry after the revolver was revealed. Anticipating its less than sterling market value, Leach had merely wrapped the gun in an oily rag as a storage procedure. Held in Harry Cain's slightly shaky hand now the gun, a .38, gave off the earthy smell of an ancient bone pulled from a tar pit. Good thing for Bill, Harry couldn't readily identify the odor as evidence that the pistol was in its latter stages of functionality. If he had been made aware of its decrepitude, he simply might not have cared. He too was want to attach any type of emotional significance to a gun, but for different reasons than

the average Texan. He had convinced himself that he was already dead in many ways. He was methodically scrubbing his memory of signifiers. He thought it a highly overdue act genuinely, just as a bit of philosophical rehab. Seeing Rance Muto in that state had convinced Harry to meet his maker naked. He had no purchase on the views of others. He needed what he needed merely as a utility. He thought himself more like Bones every day.

According to Leach, this gun was small enough to forget once it was concealed on your person.

"They give you a hard time about it, you just tell them you forgot it was on your person," Bill told Cain holding the pistol in one of his palms. "Happens all the time," he told him. "In airport lines and so forth. You're just walking around with it legally and suddenly there it is. Down here nobody will accuse you of anything if you claim this is the case with honesty."

The .38 was designed originally as a quick draw gun for police. It had a tiny little kick to it. There was no real physical preparation needed to fire it accurately.

The gun was a six shooter. It was manufactured when cops didn't have to worry so much about lacking sufficient firepower while on the streets. Nowadays, most pistols used for violent crime were semi-autos. Around here, peace officers toted around M1's in the trunks of their cars. They didn't consider themselves lucky or unlucky nowadays to have to do it. They came to work dressed in Kevlar vests regardless of the hot weather. They didn't know any world different than this one. They didn't think anything of it to have to train their weapons on civilians routinely and search the body language of their target to see if it was permissible for them to shoot.

With the six-shooter, Bill was saying, there was no need to load six bullets. Not anymore.

"Look, you're going to be outgunned regardless so there's no need to engage directly," he told Harry. "It's the slow

trigger response rate that'll get you killed regardless of the ammo at your disposal," he told him, recalling a border patrol agent's surmising the situation to him on the occasion of him buying an assault weapon for work. Yes, it was not unheard of to have the agents lay out their own cash on weapons as the present administration was otherwise occupied with wars altogether farther away than south Texas. They didn't have AR's at their disposal like so many Zetas had. Their own semi-automatics might as well have been bb guns when going up against a military-grade assault rifle. But it was an improvement over the six-shooter that had been official issue up until 1997. With such a weapon, you couldn't get more than two shots off before your opponent had unloaded their clip completely. Which meant functionally you could at best get off one shot and duck for cover. Some of the bullets they used in their ARs ripped through Kevlar supposedly. The agent Bill had been talking to had not seen it himself. But this was what he had heard.

Because Cain looked to Bill Leach like a person who would train a pistol on himself solitarily, he was offering the enticement of a single bullet with the .38 in order to seal the deal.

"Here ya go, bub. Crimped it in the back myself," he said of the small silver round he placed in the chamber. A professional gunsmith, Bill, he was pointing the .38 downwards at a lead plate as he loaded. Once the bullet was inserted, he gave the chamber a spin before tightening the pin on the .38's front. There you go. A ready-made game of Russian roulette was available to Harry if he was in the mood (and Harry seemed to be in the mood presently). The only request Bill had for Harry was to get off the street before he played. There was no purpose after all alarming folks unnecessarily about the sort of establishment Leach's gun store might have been at-root. Surely if he shot himself in a public place his steps eventually would be retraced to Bill's store. There would certainly be no receipt generated with this

transaction. Once this buyer was in a secluded place, every trace of a connection to Bill would be erased regardless of the fervor of the inquiry being made.

For this sort of quickie transaction, Leach dealt in cash only. And once he showed Harry Cain where the weapon's safety was located, the customer training course was at an end.

"Put it in your pocket with a wad of Kleenex so it don't leave an imprint of itself on the outside," he said to Harry once the .38 was in his possession. Cain had been moving it around enough on his person in the meantime to signal an uncertainty on his part about where it should be concealed. "I don't know if anybody's gonna look. Or if they would care if they did," Don said. "They mess with you, you should stare at them and say you didn't know. No, you didn't know," he told him. "And, really," he said, "how could you? You could bribe them once you're in Mexico. For maybe three hundred dollars. You show them there's only one bullet down in there anyway and they'll let you on your way. You're not there to mess with nobody and they can see that. You show them your .38 with only one bullet in the chamber and they'll know right away you ain't down there to give anybody grief but yourself."

Once Harry left, Bill shuffled out from behind his display case and remove the cardboard sign he had placed in the window. Only when he saw a still alive Cain shuffling down the street in a stumblebum way could he consider himself safe.

"It's my job to put 'em in their grave. But until that moment they're on their own," he said to himself and thought about closing up early. He thought of the constant desire within him and other Brownsvillians to take a swim. And then take a long nap just before dinner.

This was how you beat the heat down here. By taking it easy. You swam when you could and didn't towel off even a little after you emerged from the water. A man needed to

protect himself from the elements more than he might think within these southern climes. The *siesta* was a tradition that had yet to take root in America, but it rightly should have. Bill Leach had a couch in the back room near his smithy tools for that very purpose. He was considering lying down even now.

Even for somebody vociferously opposed to any habit of self-preservation, the presence of the .38 slapping against Harry's right leg was proving fiercely distracting, despite the knowledge that its aligned chamber lacked a bullet.

"What you doing here anyway, white boy," a slightly overfed guard, Joel Hernandez, asked Harry Cain upon his having reached the Mexican border guard's station inside the *centro de acogida*. Joel was smiling broadly when he said it, enacting a familiar display that at least several of the Anglo tourists having crossed his path would have found charming (else he wouldn't have started with it constantly like the intro to a precious tune).

Joel had a gold veneer in one of his front teeth that he liked to let the sun glint off and into his interrogee's eyes. Once he had taken to wearing a straw sombrero, but his bosses had told him to knock that shit off and process more quickly. They too were overtired and wanted to be home for supper. Over here in Matamoros, besides, it was not good to be known for anything. They all wanted to live and die devoid of the media spotlight. They realized the absurd things that men were shot for routinely around here. They didn't want any of them to be accused of stirring the pot.

But Joel Hernandez was irrepressible as a stand-up comedy aspirant. He thought of himself as the Mexican Don Rickles. He liked to watch the faces of gringos change as he ripped into them. There was always that nationalist aspect to it as well. He wanted them to realize that *they* were the minorities presently on Mexican soil. He wanted to remind them of the reality before they were released to the populous at large.

He wasn't by-and-large racist. He felt himself somehow entitled to fuck with others simply because of his occupation. And if they said shit back to him he would not be offended at all. He was a life-affirming guy more than anything. He thought it was best to live and let live.

This *maniquí blanco* who was in front of him at the moment, however, was a truly strange case. Joel could see it in the man's muddy eyes that he would be somebody on whom good humor would be wasted. Probably involved in drug procurement as best as Joel could tell. Because he had arrived on the Mexican side of the border: **a.** alone and **b.** in somewhat disheveled state that made it seem he would have trouble answering basic questions related to his business down here.

"Don't ask me to let you slide based merely on the evidence of your good looks," Joel said to Harry and glanced balefully up at the semi-cloudy sky. He wanted to blind this white nigger with his gold tooth God ray forthwith, stick the light in his motherfucking eyes if only to let him know who the real authority was around here. He thought this was the way people like this were reasoned with. For God sakes, if you're going to be transporting drugs across one of the busiest border crossings in the world, at least comb your motherfucking hair first! This all led to a feeling in Hernandez that Harry was some sort of racist. He didn't see the average Mexican immigration inspector as particularly intelligent, apparently. Or at least not particularly discerning (which in his view was the same thing). Joel was serious enough about his job to be touchy when the entire profession was attacked. He thought of his own feelings as more or less in line with every other official here at B&M. He realized he was susceptible to bribes, but he didn't want to have it thrown in his face that this was so by a man like Cain who obviously, by one look at him, had no respect for authority. Cain needed to be in Mexican jail long enough to let prevailing authority figure out the crime later. Mexican police were very good at

figuring out the crimes of people after they were arrested. They seldom missed when such matters came to trial. They seldom were accused of incompetence in open court by defense attorneys un-aligned with the cartels.

He thought Harry should walk back across the border, get some sleep, drink a pot of coffee, and try to gain entrance once more tomorrow. Tomorrow, Joel was not working so that would be an optimal time to try. Maybe when he came back he should have his act together and have his pockets emptied out. There was a bulge in one pocket of his shorts that had not escaped Joel's attention. But even he likely wasn't dumb enough to try and smuggle contraband into Mexico that way.

If you were a Mexican border agent and wanted to fuck with an American properly, what you did to him was take him aside and have him wait in the broom-closet sized interrogation room off to the guard post's right for several hours.

"Maybe you need a better attitude about things altogether," Joel said to Harry once he had cornered him in the room.

He asked Harry Cain to take off his clothes. He was just bullshitting with him! There was no reason for Harry to take off his clothes! Unless of course he fucking wanted to! And even then, Joel thought, he should leave 'em on. In truth only the most reprobate of entrants to Mexico—those who were obviously intoxicated or brandishing bottles of alcohol—were detained. And even then, only for a short period. The official line of reasoning for such permissiveness was that the state lacked sufficient funds for robust enforcement. But the truth was that they couldn't be bothered with all the red tape involved in the process. The average Mexican thought himself estranged from the country's power structure to such an extent that they sometimes failed to recognize that there was such a thing. Joel, for instance, thought of himself as a foreigner in his own land. He let things slide naturally when it came to acting in an official capacity on behalf of the state.

In a sense the entire border crossing check was a show put on for the satisfaction of Mexico's American partners. They wanted to be put at ease that international standards of some sort were being upheld. If Mexico simply shuttered the guard stations completely and replaced them with a massive duty-free shop, there would likely be gringo protest about the matter. Thus, the idea had been for a guard to perform his job but not too well. Even the Mexican Don Rickles would be required to end the joke with healing praise after a while. Hernandez thought that an agent who routinely was arresting potential tourists at the border would eventually face censure from his higher ups, if only because of all the paperwork he had made others fill out in satisfaction of international human rights standards.

This *maniquí blanco* was likely too out of it to know of such trepidation on the part of the Mexican justice system. Which made him ripe for harassment short term. He was likely a serious problem long term (as it seemed he was devoid of real limits concerning his personal behavior and would ultimately bring some manner of harm unto the citizenry of Matamoros who had, let's face it, suffered enough already). But in the land of the cartels, a puny gringo decadent was penny ante stuff. Joel, who had lost two brothers already, couldn't be bothered. He had no intention of coming home late again.

"If I punch you in the face, I think that'll be payment in advance already for us Mexicans," Joel Hernandez said to Harry Cain. Then he did just that squarely in the chin. But lightly enough to barely cause injury unto Harry's pale visage.

Just to make conversation, Joel asked Harry what drugs he was on at the moment.

Harry told him about the Fratricyclene. He had been given a dose at the manse party in Louisiana by John Wayne Gacy. He said he had been snorting copious amounts of raped boy for days on end and watching the world shift in front of him. Well, eventually the world and his internal visions would coalesce into a single vision of being and then

he would be free utterly of the dirty looks given by men such as Joel who believed him nuts.

"But it's not a party drug," Harry told him finally feeling his chin for evidence of a bruise. "It's not something that there'd be much of a market for across the border," he said.

"I don't have any of it on me at the moment if that's what you're thinking of asking me next," Cain said. "You don't need much of it anyway to give you the desired effect."

The lone cigarette in Hernandez' shirt pocket had been for later. But he felt the need to smoke it right now.

"Why would anybody want to take it to begin with," he asked Harry. "If it don't make you high. What's the point here anyway?"

There was a patch of the muddy Rio Grande visible from this room's sole window and its rolling effluence kept Harry Cain momentarily transfixed and tongue-tied.

"I don't understand the drift of your question," he said to Joel finally.

"What's the point of taking a drug that can only make things worse for you? Why would you go forward with it? If it could only make you feel bad why would you care to at all?"

Cain thought for a second then felt around in his bulging shorts pocket for the .38.

"It's good to know that how you think about things is not the way they actually are," Harry said after a little bit of time. "It's good to know that reality isn't unmovable like an ancient fortress. Because it's not unmovable. It can be pushed in one direction or another or even broken entirely. It's good to know your own mind," he said, "and realize there's no real difference between what you think and what you perceive."

That there's no need to defer to one over the other constantly, he was telling Joel Hernandez.

"You can go crazy," he told Joel, "or the world can go crazy and carry you along with it. Because in the end, there's not such a big difference to take note of between these two

states," he said. "Between the inner madness and the outer chaos. I'm telling you that I can completely disappear from your view suddenly and you would never be the wiser. You would simply not be able to recall ever having met me."

Cain thought matters like this were completely self-evident but bore repeating if only to honor the overlap between one person's fractured fantasy and another's.

For all parties concerned," he said to Joel, "I'm saying it's the right thing to consider. Because the old way of looking at things was not working for anybody. The old way as far as turning any of us into Gods did not do its job. We admitted we were Nothing in relation to the Everything and sat back and waited for the Everything to respond. We were expecting to be rewarded for our humility. But in the end, we were just passed over and treated like the nothings we had imagined ourselves as."

The dead mouse in Harry's Brownsville hotel room he had simply ignored past the point that it began to grow slightly fragrant in the few moments that the AC had not been running non-stop. Soon the smell began to infiltrate into waking consciousness.

"Here's proof positive for you," Harry said to Joel Hernandez and held up his right hand. He spread his fingers out to the point that to Harry at least it seemed a type of free-floating sea creature, an alien being inexplicably having found its way to this little room on the US-Mexico border for no purpose that either it or any of its witnesses could discern properly. In an alackaday world, this scene couldn't have been possible, Harry Cain argued. He watched impassively as the hand moved itself around, like one more box jellyfish trying to align itself to a flow of sustenance on a subtle tide. To him, this all negated the theory of an external universe impervious to the wishes and desires of those who had gained self-consciousness within it. This was both good and bad as far as he could see: insofar as that which was whimsical or merely degenerate could suddenly be created spontaneously.

When the rules had been in place, there was no such risk of chaotic occurrences, at least in a world removed from magic and the madness (albeit temporary) wrought by hallucinogenic substances. Presently one had to be in the mood to accept utterly as real the terrifying visions the world presented to one. He realized it as a burden but also as an opportunity. With this in mind, death was just another mode of transient experience. There was no finality to anything. Not anymore. Harry assumed if he ever killed himself he would be smiling at the great moment of change. There was neither relief nor salvation granted in this life. On the other hand, damnation was a concept to be embraced only by the most superstitious among us.

Through all of it Cain was determined merely not to be bored. He thought of himself as something special despite all evidence to the contrary. He wanted to be in the position to give moral instruction to others when all these questioning looks spread across their faces. They wouldn't know what to make of the universe on their own. Harry Cain knew what to make of it and at the appropriate moment would tell them to take it all in stride. He didn't see himself as especially spiritually gifted. But thanks to his death trip he was in possession of a certain brand of spiritual knowledge that he felt obliged to communicate to others. Even though they would in all likelihood be resistant to such wisdom and look for another less life-altering explanation later, he felt the need to communicate it to them. It was the least he could do for such pathetic creatures. Inexplicably, he felt he owed it to them in some way.

If Joel had seen what Harry had seen, likely all this would register as obvious. But staring at him across the table, he could see the residue of disbelief spread across his face like an infiltrating sepsis from a breached sewer pipe.

"If you're so much on another spiritual plane or whatever you just said," he said to Harry, "why you carrying that .38

around with you in your shorts with a pocket stuffed with Kleenex to hide it?"

Harry Cain dug in the pocket of his trousers and retrieved the pistol.

"Here," he said to Joel Hernandez and put it on the table between them. He hadn't been asked to show it, but he did it anyway. He was vaguely proud of the gun and wanted to show it off to him. Now that it had been detected, there was no reason not to do so. He felt the situation's fundamental unreality pulling at him consistently. Just then, he wasn't in the mood for denial. He felt whatever would happen, would happen regardless. He thought he was in the midst of a slightly boring game that would grind to a close over time because of its own mediocrity. He wasn't sweating anything concerning what the border guard might do to him. He was inured to the possibility of retribution on the part of authorities. Weird in a perpetual trance state, he was fascinated by the brown border river's flow. He wasn't going to be alive much longer. His impulse control at this point was nil.

There was a single bullet in the chamber whose placement was unknown. If Joel wanted, they could play themselves an impromptu game of Russian roulette.

"You're the craziest motherfucker I think I've ever met," Joel Hernandez said to Harry, not necessarily in an admiring way, and held the interrogation room door open for him. He realized nothing good would come of a further detaining of Harry. If they sent him back to Brownsville, likely they simply would have rejected him, denying his U.S. citizenship despite the documentation that said otherwise. Cain in his present incarnation was the personification of an undesirable. Eventually the gears of United States jurisprudence would engage, and he would be re-admitted to the country. But until that time came he would be Joel's responsibility. There would be meetings, interviews, oaths and dressing downs to endure because of the occurrence. It was much better to simply

ignore the last few minutes and pray nobody got hurt. To Joel, Harry seemed too out of it to be violent. He barely seemed to know what end of the gun to use.

Joel watched him walk away toward the city center in this bow-legged way. Immediately he was regretful about the decision to let him go.

"It's all my conscience whatever happens," he said to himself when returning to his booth and stared at the ersatz shrine to Guadeloupe that his wife had set up for him at the bottom of his desk. No, Lupe's eyes didn't follow him anymore like in the old days as he swung from side to side out of boredom. So, it was that he had come to realize all magic had flown from the world. These childish things seemed merely childish to him suddenly. He assumed it was Harry's fault, but he couldn't put the pinch on him properly. He had been infected if only slightly by the bizarre dream that had infected Harry. He didn't know where to turn for help.

When out of site of the looming bridge and the governmental structures that perched atop it, Cain stopped a moment to check which chamber the gun's lone bullet had resided in. More or less curious about the results relating to random luck, he wanted to know how many trigger pulls he was away from speeding it all to a conclusion. Two as it turned out. When refastening the chamber pin, he made sure to keep that way. Didn't want to interfere with fate hardly even though by checking he already had. He would do his best to dis-remember what he had seen. He would recoil in terror if perchance he had been forced into putting the gun to his temple in the next few hours. He thought he possessed the ability to force himself into a state of willful ignorance at least for a minute. He thought he could lie to himself about what was happening as he had always lied to others. His sense of what was true and false had been obscured to such a point that such deception was possible. He thought it would simply require him to not concentrate on the actual position of the bullet. Perhaps the bullet could be convinced to move up one

place. This was the way world worked he truly believed. Ever since Louisiana he had convinced himself that this was so. He thought reality was a piece of worn carpeting gone loose at the edges and curled up over itself. Within the loop, nothing could be said to be at a remove from the perceiver. But he wasn't sure any one perceiver was real. He was thus in search of clues constantly. He had been for the past week staring into people's faces searching out cues. He didn't know how to act in their midst. He didn't know what, if anything, they made of him.

There was no social stigma about inspecting a loaded pistol in broad daylight, at least in this part of Matamoros.

"Hacer crecer su pene más grande!" somebody yelled from the back of a flatbed truck when seeing the .38 in Harry's hand. Could have been a sign of low social status in these parts: carrying around such a puny six-shooter. Which was to say, an invitation to be fucked with. Whether they be members of the criminal class or not, *Matamoranoes* packed twenty-first century heat. They bought their Glocks in Brownsville and smuggled the guns under the seats of their trucks. To them, it was an indispensable item like a refrigerator-freezer. Occasionally they would pawn their actual refrigerator freezer in pursuit of their new gun. The gun was something that they slept with under their pillow and placed at their feet while on the crapper. They felt they didn't have a choice in the matter.

According to something overheard by Cain while standing in the border crossing, Matamoros had recently become the most violent city in Mexico, which likely put it high in the running for the most violent city on earth (along with several other narco-terrorized principalities).

"Even the nuns down here are strapped," Michael "Ron" Lanza told Harry Cain when sidling up to him at a cantina Harry had found in the little touristy patch off the *Zona de Plazas*. Nothing going on here, even though it was approaching nightfall and likely the city's violent reputation

had everything to do with it. According to Ron, the life of the city had run dry by 2000. Once the Zetas rose to prominence, everything else died. Presently they were far stronger than the police. No official took it upon themselves to stand up to them in the name of law and order or even common decency. They even had the central government scared of them. They were a paramilitary masquerading as thugs.

According to Ron Lanza, when a nun prayed down here she did so standing up. As her vestments allowed access to a holster only beneath the knee.

"If they ever get in a shootout at the very least it'll make the papers," he said to Harry who upon first seeing Lanza at this tacky cantina had flashed him the snub nose as a means of greeting. He assumed this was the way it was done in Matamoros. Well, this was how it was done down here apparently.

Such macho gesturing was as reliable an index to the decline of civilization as existed. Men in Matamoros didn't shake hands hardly. They exposed their weapons rather like they were prosimians. Harry Cain thought the practice droll. But very likely he would eventually discover the implicit vulgarity in the act. Men should act like men quite likely and tarsiers like tarsiers. There was severe recompense to suffer through likely for the entire species when such primal confusion was adopted. As even in the midst of a decaying world, one could always only be one sort of creature or the next. It was really the universe's single imperative. As one could not be simultaneously alive and dead.

A man who several generations ago would be termed ne'er do well, Ron Lanza was in Mexico to oversee the transference of a cache of automatic weapons to the Los Zetas. They were paying him two thousand dollars a weapon plus a pretty twelve-year-old girl from Chihuahua that he imagined he would keep as a sex slave. He was profoundly excited about the sex slave, less so the money. For her, he had an alternate identity already picked out. He had a timeline for

her up until her eighteenth birthday. At which point she would be freed.

"I'm a lonely guy, no two ways about it," Ron said to Harry and grabbed the bottle of mezcal from underneath the bar. He was pouring one for himself and one for Harry but guzzling them both once having countermanded his own generosity. He wasn't down here to make new friends, obviously, but his chattiness got the better of him regardless. He had a self-image as a charming rogue and was constantly trying to rationalize his psychopathic tendencies as a simple disrespect for authority in the mode of many a filmic antihero. He had a wardrobe solely compromised of Hawaiian shirts, white trousers, and one-way aviator glasses. He made up nicknames for himself constantly that he would later communicate unto imaginary friends.

Liked to bite the worm, (which was actually a lowly weevil larva, BTW) when drinking this Mixteco. And waxing on the joys of pre-pubescent snatch and the brisket sandwiches of a bar-b-que in Seguin.

"The feel of teen pussy against your rod is something you'll never forget when encountered for the first time," he said to Cain. He went on to describe it, at least the twelve-year-old variety, for Harry in minute detail. How it gripped a man's junk firmly as it might without causing real pain. No, you think fucking a sixth grader's merely an abasing joke until you go ahead and try it. At which point you're an incurable pedophile for life.

Now, along with armaments to Los Zetas, Ron marketed erotic images and videos of schoolgirls from around the world. Usually with their faces blacked out. If only because they didn't seem to be having a good time. And their tortured grimaces would ruin the erotic buzz.

"It's the ultimate pervert's fantasy, the willing child," Ron said to Cain and dug in his glass with a thumb and index finger pair for the pale white worm that had fallen into his glass. He wanted to imbibe it and become it and receive

whatever wisdom it had once possessed albeit in a highly attenuated form. This was the extent of his religious devotion presently and a substitute for the transubstantiation of the flesh.

The God of the Pale White Worm, according to Ron Lanza was a vengeful God. And one unto which obeisance needed to be shown at all times lest one be turned into a pillar of margarita salt.

"The reason I come here so often and live the life I do is I'm on a mission for the Almighty," he told Cain in between worm chews. In his line of work, marketing filth and violence unto psychopaths, death could strike at any minute. For some reason he was loath to admit this was the case. He saw himself as an existential hero straight out of 1970s cinema. Likely Eliot Gould in *The Long Goodbye*. Like Gould's Phillip Marlowe, he saw himself capable of extreme violence on a whim. He was outside of polite society and liking it that way. But the juices he stewed in emanated strictly as discharge from his own internal rot. He was in desperate need of arrest and prosecution. And conversion to Christ. He thought himself, however, just the coolest guy.

Five tons of marijuana and eight hundred pounds of cocaine according to Ron daily flowed into the States from this one city despite the best efforts of the law.

"Down here it's easy for a man to be at ease with himself," Ron Lanza said, searching furtively in one corner of this cantina for a Panaflex camera to capture his speech. He longed for the pre-*Star Wars* version of American cinema. Of grainy film stocks and half-articulated dialogue. Ron was an existentialist hero looking for his own existentialist, Bresson-influenced drama. The blood-abetted fucks of dick-gagging nine-year-olds were proving corrosive to his self-esteem. He needed art to reclaim it for him. He needed an expert scenarist's rationalizations to bring him Grace at last.

The white worm (or whatever larval growth the creature was a specimen of) exuded a bitter metallic flavor when held on the tongue for more than three seconds at a time.

"If I was you, bro," he said to Harry after a little bit of the thorax was tucked into the side of his mouth, "I'd move down here *tout suite*. For transgressive types like us, it's a Garden of Eden. Local law enforcement ignores everything nowadays except the cartels. I'm telling you to set up shop. You'll need some well-paid bodyguards who don't speak Spanish and a security equipped van. You shouldn't have any fear of either Los Zetas or the cops themselves if you spread the cash around. It's just like the mafia in New York," he said to Harry. "You don't worry about anything once you're in business with them. You certainly don't worry about the U.S. enforcement once you clear customs. I don't even think the local police down here take their calls anymore."

He was thinking constantly of buying property in Matamoros. Eventually he would renounce his American citizenship and live either here or some place in Baja where he could work the border crossing in San Diego.

"Only for you there's no death penalty," Ron Lanza said to Harry. He was mining the little bit of biographical info Harry had given him when the question was asked why he was down here. It was a typical sociopath's trick. He was trying to pose as someone's friend by simply feeding his patter back to him in slightly different words. They tell you they're a lumberjack, you tell them you have always had an animus against trees. So on and so on until they let their guard down. Ron was predatory like that without even being aware that he was. From his perspective he was merely networking. The use he had for this pale person in front of him at the moment was unclear to him. But he knew at some point he would be angling to get him alone somewhere. He looked like he was holding something in his shorts pocket. To Ron it would all unfold as a series of fortuitous occurrences.

He wouldn't know a second before he jacked him that he was going to jack him. He was of an alien disposition entirely.

In backwards Mexico, you should know, the death penalty was on the verge of being abolished completely. And it hadn't been used against a citizen since 1937.

"Maybe you'll find it boring at first, all the poverty and the lack of social ambition," Ron said to Cain and considered next steps. "But apart from security, the standard of living here is dirt cheap," he said. "You can drink all day down here and no one will look at you strangely. Down here nobody's on your ass about anything. It's simply a matter of staying alive to take it all in. But I can take a look at you, kid, and see you're an expert in survival. You look like you've been through some hard times. You look like you know what I'm talking about when I say you have to be aware of what's happening around you at all times. If only to make it to the next day."

If only to have somewhere to crash between deals, Ron had taken a room several blocks from here. Daily he had set a Sri Lankan cobra and several mice loose inside of the room to act as a guardian and food supply for the guardian respectively.

"You take a step back before you take a step in," he said to Cain when arriving at the room's threshold twenty minutes after taking off from the cantina. He had stolen a bottle of Mixteco. Ron was loaded with U.S. cash, but he refused to pay for drinks, arguing it was counter to his roguish lifestyle. At least while in Mexico, he took what he wanted and expressed outrage at those who stopped him. They didn't know who he was apparently. Like the cobra itself who was likely hiding under the bed, there was no distinction made between meal and chef. They would all in time need to have the aggression beaten out of them by Ron. Tactically just then it was not in his interests to do so. He was prepared to endure a temporary bit of danger for the promotion of his greater good.

The way you handled a cobra who was in your room was to distract it from the front with back and forth movements of one hand and pin its head to the floor from the back using a long stick with a y-shaped ending situated in the other.

"They have the brains of a flea, truth be told," Lanza said to Harry once this stunt had been successfully accomplished and the creature was back in its wire cage in the room's corner. Pitch black snake shit was everywhere in the room, pellets hard as anthracite and riddled with protruding mouse bones. If Ron was possessed of the desire to clean it up, he was making a good showing at disguising the fact. Once his "pet" had been put away, Ron unzipped his white trousers and reached lazily for the small boning knife he kept under the pillow usually just for show. He wanted to have Cain revel in its presence momentarily just before using it on him. He assumed him drunk on mescal. Just as he was. They were both going nowhere fast.

He didn't have any reason to fear Harry. To Ron, Harry seemed like one more youngish goth tourist straying across the border for kicks and unaware of what he was on the verge of getting himself into.

Somebody like Ron Lanza could not read the danger signs about Cain as he was unfailingly so self-absorbed that other people registered with him as so many ambulatory coat racks that were devoid of all intention completely.

"No sé qué fue de él en realidad , cómo murió," Harry said to Beatrice Valdez, a newfound acquaintance of his when, three blocks down the street from Ron's room, she asked him what had become of its single human resident. Grabbing the knife from Ron, Harry had drawn a half-inch deep smiley face with it from ear to ear and watched as slowly as he might Ron began to die.

Wasn't anybody's fault generally. As it was all Harry's fault specifically.

Merely, he sensed a bad vibe emanating from the man. So he killed him before he could be killed in turn.

Or rather he cut him and held his surprisingly tiny body down as he began to die. There was a difference though it was hard for him to articulate exactly what it was. He felt no moral responsibility for the act. He felt it was happening entirely at a distance, away from the ethical bubble in which he operated.

He had sliced Ron's left and right carotid artery ably enough so the blood when it came did not pour from the wounds as much as it spurted, timed to the increasingly slowing palpitations of his heart.

"Sangre por todas partes," he said to this Beatrice, perhaps not using the right idiom. He had learned his Spanish in a long-ago world of post-adolescent aspiration when he still gave a shit about such a thing as learning. Lanza's blood had spurted everywhere just after he was knifed. Presently there was visual evidence to support the claim. Harry's own clothes were bloody, caught in the inescapable firehouse of Ron's effluence. There was blood on the Kleenex within which the .38 was embedded and blood dripping on the pale skin underneath it. Harry needed a shower and a change of clothes to preserve social decorum. He needed the intercession of a respectable citizenry to tell him how gross he was and call the police on him.

Wasn't going to happen in such a place and time as Matamoros in the middle of the drug wars.

"They see you like this and they think you are a big deal," Beatrice explained to Harry dabbing at his bloody shirt with a tapered finger. "There's blood around here all the time," she said. "They think maybe you are Zetas of the American side. Maybe a CIA officer that they think works with Los Zetas to bring the government of Mexico down."

Indeed, as ordinary *Matamoranoes* strolled by, they refused out of fear to gaze upon Harry for more than a single instant once spying the holy red color on him. They assumed correctly the blood was the blood of another. They had no desire to become involved in how it got there.

Something evil had happened they realized and that was all they cared to think about it. They saw Harry's placid face and they realized something evil had happened. They had no real authority to turn to. Their society was falling apart. They saw themselves helpless to counteract the flood of violence leveled against them by authorities on all sides.

Some of them had known Ron Lanza. He would not be missed (though this was beside the point largely, given the extravagance of his end).

"He had guns that he needed to deliver to us," Beatrice Gomez told Harry and thought to ask him about their whereabouts. He certainly didn't know, hadn't been told, but assumed they were in transit to whatever destination Ron had arranged for them. All the time he had talked about it, Ron had not revealed his supply line to Harry. Likely there were a lot of guns. Likely the client he was dealing with dealt in bulk in such matters. They had no desire to downscale their operation for lack of logistical support.

Somebody like Ron Lanza would only be tolerated by men who were serious operators and were in need of services desperately.

"Ninety ARs," she said to him, "with a hundred twenty rounds each."

She said that the guns would usually arrive in a vegetable truck that could be unloaded of its precious cargo in ten minutes and sent back out on its rounds. "I don't believe he keeps any of them for himself or has a set place where he stores them on the Brownsville side," Beatrice told Harry. She asked him how well he knew Ron.

"I'd say at least as well as he knew himself," Cain said to Beatrice and wondered if she was a narc. Who else but a narc would have been into Ron Lanza so heavily? Even his goddamn mother didn't want to know from him likely. Nobody asked questions about such a man just to ask questions.

The kiddie porn hardcopies Cain had seen in Lanza's room, for example, had an expected excessive feel to it. Merely Harry was fascinated that they could exist at all. He saw it as something so socially abhorrent it might well self-destruct before it had a chance to be viewed.

"Zetas get off on it because it's so illegal, not because it's so beautiful," Beatrice told Harry when the subject was broached. He was recalling one image of a boy being violated by the end of a broom handle. "To them," she said, "it's a sign of strength to look at such things and not flinch from them. It's all part of the process of making a Zeta," she said. "They want you to view other humans like bugs. They want you to be able to look at one and see a complete stranger instead of somebody like yourself."

Describing the way they viewed such material to Harry, Beatrice Gomez seemed to be recalling something from ancient history, not a scene she witnessed personally last week.

"Feed the recruits these drugs, maybe a little PCP in the milk," Beatrice said and found her own voice by degrees sounding like Harry Cain's. If she found this strange even slightly she did not let on that it was so. To her, life was to be taken as a series of grotesque, unrelated images. There was no coherent lesson to be sucked from its marrow once it yielded a corpse. Except that it changed, then it ended. Which was no real moral at all.

Beatrice Gomez had braces on her teeth bought with the cartel's ill-gotten gains. She had a pronounced limp because of a blister on the bottom of her foot that refused to heal through all the treatment applied to it.

"I am the Stigmatic of Matamoros," Beatrice said to Cain after deriding the area's religiosity rigorously. She thought maybe there was a psychosomatic element to the ailment but she couldn't admit this was the case. She didn't have any personal demons that she knew of. Like so many around here, she was devoid of pity completely. Well, maybe not

deep down (and this was what caused her to suffer). Ron Lanza she would not mourn for regardless of the personal peril his demise put her in. She found him repulsive. As any normal person would have.

She wanted to help Harry Cain clean himself up prior to his real inquisition at the hands of Los Zetas. So she directed him to her own apartment above the notorious brothel *Séptimo Cielo* where he would be able to gain a fresh change of clothes and thus avoid detection by the remnants of real authority in this town.

"Not even a little?" she asked him when he refused her offer. Beatrice didn't understand Harry's mindset at the time. Maybe he was hollow inside just like her ex-boyfriend Hernan who, somewhere out in the belt of *machiadoras* lining this part of the country, had encountered a gruesome fate. "Buried the motherfucker up to the neck and left him there to die in forty-five degrees," she said to Cain, claiming that if he didn't try and hide himself even a little he would likely meet the same exact fate.

Shit like that happened all the time down here to the curious gringo. Where they get into one sort of trouble and wind up encountering another.

It's OK, but it happened. For the American, the lesson to be drawn from such stories was to not come down here at all. But for Harry it was too late. He seemed to want to meet with his own oblivion and in as expeditious a manner as he could. Which was the real reason why he had declined her invitation for salvation.

Despite the immoderate heat, he thought it was a fine day out here. He had no intention of cowering inside, waiting to be extinguished by impassive forces of nature. He wanted to live a little. He wanted to see some sites related to this dilapidated city before it was too late.

Apart from this little commercial section of margarita bars and un-stocked gift shops, Matamoros in its present incarnation seemed to lack a tourist area completely.

“¿dónde está la acción?” Harry Cain asked random passersby who refused to make eye contact with him as he maneuvered down half-paved streets decorated with parked cars of a nineteen eighties vintage. Well, he assumed over time somebody would indulge him to the point that they would give him an answer, but it seemed he was going to have to wait awhile for it. They feared him even as he grew ever more frustrated with them. They saw him as somebody completely unhinged, a *extranjero loco* just like Ron Lanza.

He could understand the comparison. But this didn't make it so. He was, after all, one of the good guys in the world. He stood up for the oppressed and persecuted of his own country. He viewed himself as, despite his recent indulgence in murderous violence, somebody worthy of veneration.

Not that he would deserve a break when a moment of reckoning came. At such a moment, he assumed what would be would be. He had matured past the point of seeing the world as a just place. Quite frankly, he had always suspected it of being such an unjust place, but he had only recently admitted it. He had witnessed the disgusting inner workings of the world's greatest democracy up close for too long to form any other opinion. He thought it was a self-evident proposition. He thought it almost went without saying.

Which was not to say he hated people to the same degree that his onetime sidekick Bones had seemed to hate them for their vanity and stupidity.

“You didn't ask to be born any more than I did,” he said in English to the group of twelve-year-old boys who had been following him at a safe distance since he had left Beatrice's presence back in the commercial zone. In this neighborhood commercial property had yielded to a series of progressively deeper lots separated by housing that would be seen as squalid even by Mexican standards. This was the Mestizo part of town apparently to judge by the red brown faces Harry perceived poking out of pane-less windows. They seemed

happy but that might have been a mere effect of their suffering. They had likely lost the ability to calibrate distinctions in their emotional states to any clear degree. So it was that the Indian face had become an Indian mask of the sort worn at carnival time in Brazil. They were functionally insane to an outsider and attempting to get them to describe to you what ailed them was a fool's errand. They didn't believe in themselves finally as beings distinct from either one another or the shit-corrupted earth below.

The boys following Cain around wanted him to lift his damp shirt so that they could take a look at the giant growth underneath.

"Sabemos quién eres," they said to him who seemed profoundly disinclined to cooperate with them. Well, he was the tourist first of all and the perceiver beyond the perceived. He thought, furthermore, they needed to have a greater respect for their elders and not make such demands. They were little Zetas. They all had semiautomatic rifles strapped on their bony and naked shoulders. They were high on some local form of jenkem, but in Cain's eyes this was no excuse. He was a visitor in their country, after all. He thought they needed to conform to some manner of welcoming behavior when addressing him. He thought at the very least they needed to shoulder their arms instead of pointing them at him and smiling as they went through the motions of taking aim between his shoulder blades.

He didn't know what they wanted with him and he suspected they didn't know either. Merely they were fucking with him, attempting to intimidate him in order to collect on a debt they felt the world at large owed them. They were young and benighted, but they could still grieve against the universe with the intensity of an embittered old man. They knew they had been put in an awful situation by circumstances and there was no appeal for what seemed to be a punishment for a crime committed in a previous life.

They thought themselves owed a great deal and were prepared to demand payment from any agent of life—that was to say, any other person they encountered in ordinary life—in as brutal a way as they might. Didn't matter to them, notions of guilt or innocence. They felt everybody was guilty after a fashion. Which made any moral judgment of others beside the point. They were children and liked to have fun also, to play games, albeit with real guns. They were children that a properly functioning society would have incarcerated immediately. In Matamoros for the most part they had been left to their own devices. Some of them lacked official names recorded in any government registry. They used the names their cliques had given them instead, usually derogatory epithets about some flaw in their appearance.

"Run motherfucker," they said to Harry Cain using one of the few bits of English they knew and discharged several rounds in his general direction. They were careful with the number of bullets they used. So much so that they fired off single rounds in long intervals. The closest that one came nicked a fold in Harry's sweat-drenched shorts. This was likely a result of poor aim on the boy as they clearly only had an intention of terrifying him. This was their sport. It was used on the locals mostly or unwise gringos who would wander down here unaccompanied by a security detail. They did it because they were bored, because they needed something to do. They would look back on the incident tonight before sleep descended as so much harmless fun. No, they weren't evil at all. They would kill for the most part only out of a sense of self-protection. The others they fucked with only to fuck with them. They saw no harm in the activity.

Cain wasn't that terrified of dying given his present mindset. But he ran from them anyway out of a sense of courtesy.

The natives had made a simple request and now he was in the process of honoring it. He didn't sprint but jogged at medium pace reasoning that the heat of the day would take

him down before the bullets if he moved as fast as they wanted him to move. The sun was halfway vanished below the horizon at this time of day like a junkie's left eye rolling up into its lid, but it was hotter than ever out here. Something septic, antithetical to human life had made its way into the weather patterns in this part of the world and took root permanently. Like the plague it would be the death of millions before it abated. It fed on Harry Cain presently like a second heroin addiction. Even in the midst of a hail of bullets, he felt its presence, as ubiquitous as the earth's pull. Or death itself maybe. It would reclaim him. But until that time, he hated it as much as anything else.

He stopped running when the terrible ambient heat compelled him to. He sensed he was still not free of the terrible enfants who seemed intent of killing him forthwith.

"As a general rule, I do not go out between the hours of six AM and eight PM. And then only when accompanied by a parasol." Kievan Xaxor, a vampire of the Vladimir-Suzdal clan said this to Harry Cain, through a veil of opaque baby skin as he sat on his concrete throne in Matamoros' outskirts.

A bachelor vampire nowadays, he was obviously down on his luck. He had wound up in this part of the world which might be reasonably termed a hellhole. He had the nicest abode in the neighborhood, nevertheless. He took good care about that which he had the means of taking good care of. Which was to say, mostly the hacienda's exterior. He scavenged material as an aid in the endeavor. He thought of himself as a decorator of the highest caliber.

Possessor of a tragic beauty of the old Blanche Du Bois variety, Kievan found himself constantly revivifying old triumphs. These were from centuries fourteen through eighteen mostly. In that old world, understand, being an undead Ukrainian count opened certain doors, albeit the ones that led to the royal abattoir. Nowadays he found himself estranged from his aristocratic heritage utterly. He couldn't afford the plane fare back to the mother country, let alone

have some place to go once he touched down. Count the number of times on fingers and toes that he had tried to kill himself in earnest. He would wake invariably from the gray fog of the afterlife repaired. He was devoid of sex and companionship as utterly as a slab monolith. Nothing to live for save for the minor interest that the Apocalypse brought. For him, it couldn't come fast enough.

Having seen Harry running down the street in such a half-panicked way made Kievan recall his humanity briefly. Enough to beckon him inside his octagonal home with one bony hand even as the other curled a glass of infant blood.

"Only the truly young ones, the spillage of those emptied of corruption," Kievan Xaxor said to Harry of his libation, licking the remnants of his glass with the bottom of a forked tongue. He made no attempt to hide his true nature in front of Harry Cain, devoid as he was of the necessity to keep the vileness of his surroundings at bay in the manner of a real mortal. Let them find him and use him as a bonfire log for all he cared. He would relish the opportunity to revisit his life as a fresh monster.

Creatures like him only gained relevance through the revulsion they inspired in the mortal race. And when they forgot about him he became debased in a truly fundamental way. The hurt became deep past flesh and bone down into the fabric of existence. He was undead, unreal, and uninvolved in the misery that flowed out of him like effluence from a limb long gone painless with rot. His life was not his to mourn over any longer. He didn't feel really that he had anything to gain or lose.

The babies Kievan had claimed from the local hospitals of the city. And also some from the hospitals south and west in towns with names that were almost unpronounceable to him and unmemorable to him regardless.

"There's poison in the blood down in those parts," he said to Cain, "poison in the blood of the mothers who have gone drug addicted. And also in the seed of the fathers who have

passed their lives without medical care and rife with parasites and maladies that quickly will be their end," he said to Cain. He quickly stared outside at the polygonal port that was the only opening in this residence that had been his home for the past twenty years. This hacienda had been built by a madman or at least by somebody completely unversed in the nuances of architecture as understood by ordinary humans. It had an octagonal shape and a pink exterior. Maybe it was a cage for some sort mythical creature too ugly to be witnessed in any elaborate detail. Its walls were necessarily thick and unwelcoming to any opening that might be retrofitted within it. Whoever had been meant to live here originally had been meant to live in utter seclusion, in the midst of a medium-sized city. This suited Kievan Xaxor just fine. He had no intention of mingling with the local populous. He could barely speak Spanish as it was.

Maybe this was not an actual place in the waking world, Cain supposed, but rather a fanciful construct of a deteriorated mind. Very soon, he imagined the walls of the hacienda would start to meld and morph into something utterly different than what was now apparent. He assumed somehow that its function would still be the same. It would always be a cage meant for an animal whatever its final configuration. Even in the rendered world of post-Fratrocyclene consumption, he assumed this truth would survive. He assumed this truth would survive the cataclysmic collision of galaxies scheduled to take place in four billion years.

Kievan Xaxor's hacienda had a kitchen. And in that kitchen he had strung up the carcasses of the mutilated babies he had collected over the months from the hospitals of northeast Mexico.

"For some it's a gruesome scene," he said to Harry and feigned ignorance about the smell emanating from its precincts so powerfully that even a rank stranger like Cain felt obliged to comment on it. Indeed, Kievan had grown

accustomed to his surroundings so aptly by this point that he was barely aware of any sense data at all. He lived in the nexus of dreams and reminiscences, like many a dotty ex-pat. This obliviousness was the only expected aspect to him, really. Underneath the smooth skinned veil, he seemed to be divested of the ability to express emotions. His face was a mask presented to the world as a convention of being. He had no use for it anymore. It was not part of him.

Devoid of a serious commitment to his present surroundings, there were various historical getaways to which Xaxor kept returning almost out of force of habit.

"My favorite year was 1505 in Italy in Val Camonica," Kievan said to Harry Cain. "There, the Inquisitor Antonio da Brescia rendered his accusations. He built a bonfire in the town's center. There was a certain merriment to the proceedings, I recall, as it was accomplished in jest. As the witches burned, nobody shied away from the spectacle," he said. "They were all at that time made of sterner stuff considerably. They all had their definite notions of what the afterlife held for them all."

According to Kievan Xaxor, humans would at the sight of the burning bodies be roused to all manner of religious ecstasies.

"When the smoke from the charred bodies hit their lungs, they tended toward ecstatic declarations," Xaxor said to Harry and raised his bony arms in feeble imitation therein. They saw righteousness in the judgment rendered by the church and proof of the supernatural in its fulfillment. Innocent women died because others wanted to be free of such condemnation, to live a virtuous life past the point of election into heaven. The more that the guilty were identified, the more heaven-bound they were. As there was only so much sin in the world to go around. They reveled in the smoke of burning bodies because its presence seemed a sort of personal vindication. If this were not the case, God would not have let

it be so. And the Inquisition would not have been allowed to continue.

Half-joy, half terror was how Kievan described the faces of those who had witnessed the burning of so many at Val Carmonica over the years. They wanted God to appear in front of them and vindicate their bloodlust. But He never did. They wanted God to appear and condemn their wickedness. But this was not in the cards either. They stood in front of the flames rather and moved in the smoke until both had vanished. In the morning, the children would come and pick witch bones from the ashes to use as relics or playthings. Nobody stopped them or thought the practice perverse. Just after the plague years, Europe birthed a culture drenched in death. They had no recourse anymore to control their baser impulses.

Kievan Xaxor liked the Italians' lack of pretension and the way that, when a child would be discovered in the morning blue as a robin's egg, it would not be cause amongst them for alarm.

"They did not need protection from the eternal, from the grimness of reality even slightly in those days," he recalled for Harry and sighed. "So many times, I look back and wish I was there. The savagery that the peasants of the twenty-first century evince, I am afraid, is always motivated by the fear of death, not the desire to mingle with it. It is always life where rank cruelty is invariably discovered, never death. But the recent technological achievements of men convinces them that they are at a remove from death. They burn their heretics inside now, behind high walls and using methods that protect them from the discovery of their own savage nature. It has all become a boring affair, I am afraid. There is no life-affirming quality to the modern brand of witch burning. And so you see here I sit a prisoner in my own domicile. I am waiting for a return to the old superstitious ways. But to do this death must be let out into the street to play. And one must not consider oneself ashamed at all in finding oneself attracted to it."

Auschwitz in 1943, he recalled, was the end for him on the Continent. There, the ashes of the dead were so bitter to him that he had taken his leave for the Americas immediately, albeit by a circuitous route over the North Pole. Now here he was staring out through his own skin veil and the octagon before him, entranced by the decadence he beheld. At nightfall the frightful youths of Matamoros would don Jesus Christ masks and parade around with their AR's on full display. It was apparently a local custom of some renown. Or it was a new custom that had started only last month and merely seemed ancient because of its perverse nature.

You wanted to help a stranger in the area, what you did was flag him down and place a pistol in his hand with a single bullet in the chamber.

"I see you have come prepared," Kievan said to Harry and stared impassively at the crinkled veil of skin in front of him moving back and forth with the mild exhalation his words were borne upon. Of course, Cain had meant to kill himself eventually. And according to Kievan, such an activity was only mastered by motivated people absent of the ability to procrastinate.

"Up to the throat," he said to him demonstrating on himself with a finger, "not the temple. Everything they tell you in your schools is complete lies on this matter! Complete lies! Hark: when the breath leaves the body the spirit will depart! It's inevitable as the ash falling from a dying world that only I will be present to see. So on this subject I am afraid I have knowledge only through observation. But you can go through with it by yourself and teach me once more. At which point I will lift the veil and suck the blood from you. And then leave your body for the children to discover and let them do with you as they will."

Leaning back in the hacienda's lone chair, Harry Cain removed the .38 from his pants pocket and pulled the trigger. Eventually he grew bored of everything once more and migrated to another room. A flat screen TV was on, showing

Death Trip 243

the progress of one of the on-going American wars. A mutilated soldier of unknown race and national affiliation was staring into the camera wondering what had gone wrong.

*Did they treat you as well as they should?
Did you lead a virtuous life?
Have your prayers been answered as they would
In dreams of paradise?*

Around four AM a boy in a Jesus Christ mask came around and poked his inside the octagon's octagonal window.

“¿Dónde ha ido el maestro?” he wanted to know. *“¿El maestro?”*

Harry Cain said he didn't know to whom he was referring and turned to another channel.

Death Trip 244

About the Author

David Miller is the author *Little Ethiopia*, *Sailor Boy*, and *Gut Bucket Blues*.

This is his eighth novel.

